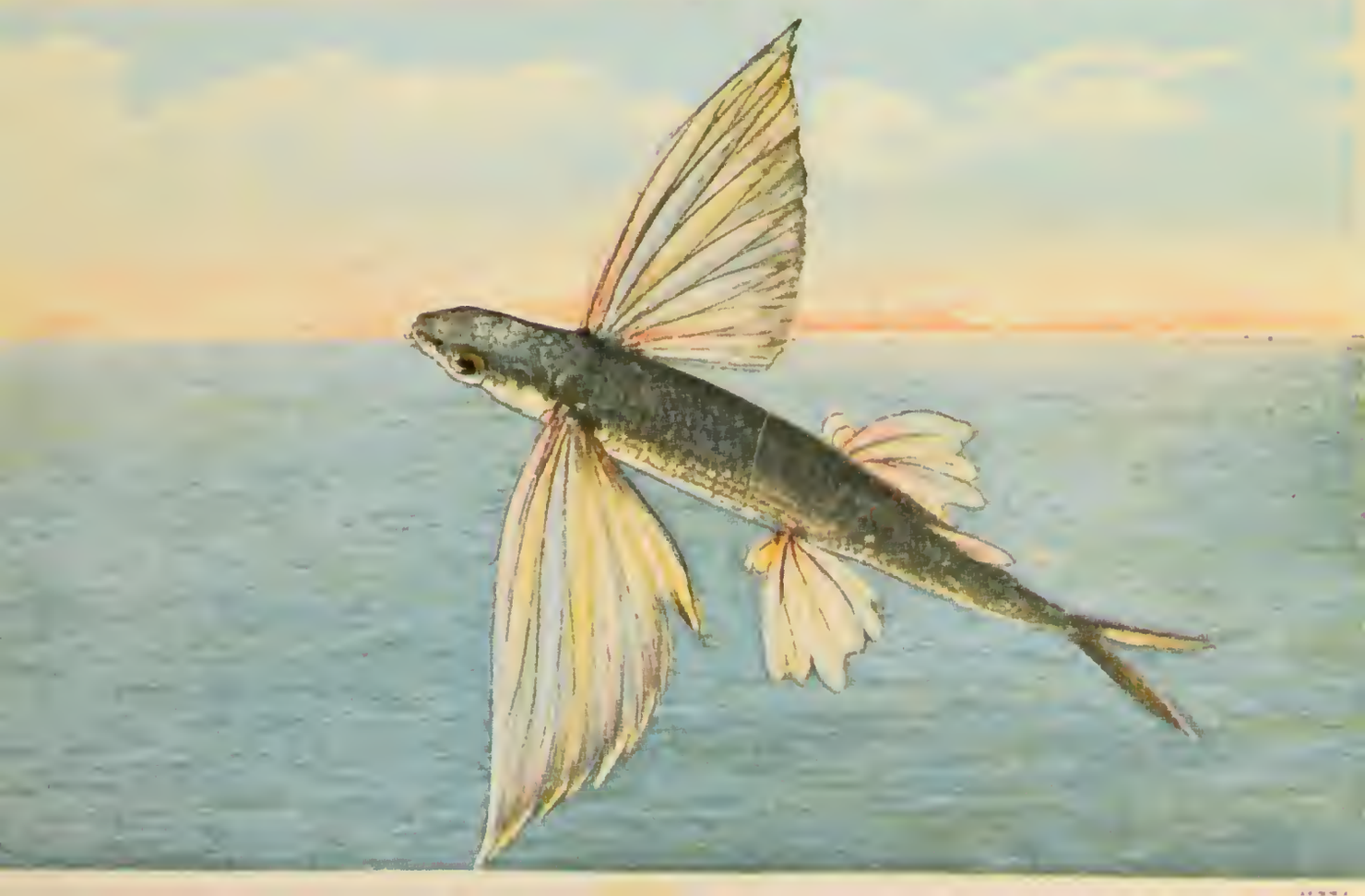
C 3 FLYING FISH, CATALINA ISLAND, CALIFORNIA



FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 26 *SPRING 1982*

PUBLISHED BY OBERLIN COLLEGE

OBERLIN, OHIO

EDITORS *Stuart Friebert*
David Young

ASSOCIATE EDITORS *Alberta Turner*
David Walker

BUSINESS MANAGER *Carolyn Savage*

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS *Samuel Cash*
Keith Smith

COVER *Stephen J. Farkas Jr.*

FIELD gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to FIELD, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Subscriptions: $6.00 a year / $10.00 for two years / single issues $3.00 postpaid. Back issues 1, 3-4, 6-7, 13-24: $10.00 each. Issues 2, 5, 8-12 are out of print.

CONTENTS

Charles Wright

LONESOME PINE SPECIAL

"I was walking out this morning with rambling on my mind."
- Sara Carter

There's a curve in the road, and a slow curve in the land,
Outside of Barbourville, Kentucky, on US 25E,
I've always liked
each time I've passed it,
Bottom land, river against a ridge to the west,
A few farm houses on each side of the road, some mail boxes
Next to a dirt lane that leads off through the fields.
Each time I'd think
How pleasant it must be to live here.

In Kingsport, when I was growing up,
Everyone seemed to go to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, up US 23,
All the time.
Everyone had an uncle or aunt there,
Or played golf, or traded cars.
They were always going up there
to get married, or get liquor,
Or to get what was owed them
By someone they'd been in the service with.

Lone went up there more often than anyone else did,
Part of his territory for State Farm,
somebody said,
Without much conviction.

When the talk turned to whiskey,
and everybody dusted his best lie off,
We all knew, or thought we knew, where Lone went
With his funny walk and broken back

He could hit a golf ball a ton with,
even if he did stand sideways
Like a man hauling a body out of the water,
Being the real owner, we thought, of that gas station out on
the Jonesboro highway
You went to the back of
for a pint after 10 pm,
Lone getting richer and richer until the Moose Lodge
Started to take his business away
by doing it legal, and during the daylight.

So Lone went back, we all thought,
To stumping around the golf course, still
Hitting it sideways, still selling whatever he could
To anyone foolish enough to play him and pay him,
Old Lone, slicker than owl oil.

It was all so American,
The picket fence of wrought iron a hundred years old,
Lilacs at every corner of the lawned yard
in great heaps and folds,
A white house and wild alfalfa in scattered knots
Between the fence and the cracked sidewalk,
The wind from the Sawtooth Mountains
riffling the dust in slow eddies along the street
Near the end of June in Hailey, Idaho,
The house where Pound was born,
with its red maple floors
And small windows two blocks from Idaho 75,
Hemingway ten miles on up the same road between two
evergreens,

Nobody noticing either place
as the cars went through town
All night and all day, going north, going south . . .

Another landscape I liked
Was south of Wytheville, Virginia, on US 52
Just short of the Carolina line,
a steel bridge over the New River,
Pasture on both sides of the road and woods on the easy
slopes,
Big shrubs and trees lining the river banks like fur,
The road and the river both
Angling back toward the Iron Mountains,
The valley bulging out to the east
in a graceful swirl,
The dead chestnut trees like grey candles
Wherever the woods began . . .

What is it about a known landscape
that tends to undo us,
That shuffles and picks us out
For terminal demarcation, the way a field of lupin
Seen in profusion deep in the timber
Suddenly seems to rise like a lavender ground fog
At noon?
What is it inside the imagination that keeps surprising us
At odd moments
when something is given back
We didn't know we had had
In solitude, spontaneously, and with great joy?

Today, at midsummer noon, I took the wooden floats
To the Yaak River, the small ones I'd carved from the larch
And cedar chips,
and loosed them downstream
To carry my sins away, as the palace guardians did each year
at this time in medieval Japan,
Where the river goes under the new bridge
on County 508
And the first homesteaders took up their quarter sections.
From Sam Runyan's to Susie Speed's,
Through white water and rock and the tendrilous shade
Of the tamaracks,
out into rubbery blotches of sunlight,
The float's shadows hanging beneath them like odd anchors
Along the pebbled bottom, the river slowing and widening,
The floats at great distances from each other
Past Binder's cabin under the black
of the evergreen-covered dam
And over the falls and gone into foam and next year . . .

In the world of dirt, each tactile thing
repeats the untouchable
In its own way, and in its own time.
Just short of Tryon, North Carolina, on US 176,
Going south down the old Saluda Grade,
kudzu has grown up
And over the tops of miles of oak trees and pine trees,
A wall of vines a hundred feet high, or used to be,
Into South Carolina,
That would have gone for a hundred more with the right
scaffolding,

Rising out of the rock and hard clay in thin, prickly ropes
To snake and thread in daily measurable distances
Over anything still enough long enough,
and working its way
Out of the darkness and overhang of its own coils
To break again and again
Into the sunlight, worthless and everywhere,
breathing, breathing,
Looking for leverage and a place to climb.

It's true, I think, as Kenkō says in his *Idleness*,
That all beauty depends upon disappearance,
The bitten edges of things,
the gradual sliding away
Into tissue and memory,
the uncertainty
And dazzling impermanence of days we beg our meanings
from,
And their frayed loveliness.

Going west out of Kalispell, Montana on US 2,
If you turned off at Kila,
and skirted the big slough
Where Doagie Duncan killed three men some seventy years
ago
After a fight over muskrat hides,
Then turned south toward the timber
and higher ground
On the dirt road to the Flathead Mine,
Past Sundelius' homestead and up toward Brown's Meadows,
Then swung down where the mine road
branches right and doubles back,

You'd come through the thinning spruce and fir
And lodge pole pine to the suddenly open hillsides
And deep draws
of the Hog Heaven country
And start to see what I mean, the bunch grass and bitterroot
And wild clover flattening under the wind
As you turned from the dirt road,
opened the Kansas gate
And began to follow with great care
The overgrown wagon ruts through the blowing field,
the huge tamarack snag,
Where the tracks end and the cabin is,
Black in the sunlight's wash and flow
just under the hill's crown,
Pulling you down like weight to the front door . . .

The cabin is still sizeable, four rooms and the walls made
Of planed lumber inside,
the outside chinked with mud
And cement, everything fifty years
Past habitation, the whole structure
leaning into the hillside,
Windowless, doorless, and oddly beautiful in its desolation
And attitude, and not like
The cold and isolate misery it must have stood for
When someone lived here, and heard, at night,
This same wind sluicing the jack pines
and ruined apple trees
In the orchard, and felt the immensity
Loneliness brings moving under his skin
Like a live thing, and emptiness everywhere like a live thing
Beyond the window's reach and fire's glare . . .

Whoever remembers that best owns all this now.
And after him it belongs to the wind again,
and the shivering bunch grass, and the seed cones.

There is so little to say, and so much time to say it in.

Once, in 1955 on an icy road in Sam's Gap, North Carolina,
Going north into Tennessee on US 23,
I spun out on a slick patch
And the car turned once-and-a-half around,
Stopping at last with one front wheel on a rock
and the other on air,
Hundreds of feet of air down the mountainside
I backed away from, mortal again
After having left myself
and returned, having watched myself
Wrench the wheel toward the spin, as I'm doing now,
Stop and shift to reverse, as I'm doing now,
and back out on the road
As I entered my arms and fingers again
Calmly, as though I had never left them,
Shift to low, and never question the grace
That had put me there and alive, as I'm doing now . . .

Solo Joe is a good road.
It cuts south-west off Montana 508 above Blacktail Creek,
Crosses the East Fork of the Yaak River
and climbs toward Mt Henry.
Joe was an early prospector
Back in the days when everything came in by pack string

Or didn't come in at all.
One spring he shot his pet cat
On the front porch with a rifle between the eyes
As she came through the cabin door.
He later explained she was coming for him
but he got her first.
He drank deer's blood, it was said, and kept to himself,
Though one story has him a gambler later down river near
Kalispell.
Nobody lives there now,
But people still placer mine in the summer, and camp out
Illegally on the river bank.
No one knows anything sure about Joe but his first name
And the brown government sign that remembers him.
And that's not so bad, I think.
It's a good road, as I say,
And worse things than that will happen to most of us.

The road in is always longer than the road out,
Even if it's the same road.
I think I'd like to find one
impassable by machine,
A logging road from the early part of the century,
Overgrown and barely detectable.
I'd like it to be in North Carolina,
in Henderson County
Between Mt Pinnacle and Mt Anne,
An old spur off the main track
The wagons and trucks hauled out on.
Blackberry brambles, and wild raspberry and poison ivy
Everywhere; grown trees between the faint ruts;
Deadfall and windfall and velvety sassafras fans
On both sides . . .
It dips downhill and I follow it.
It dips down and it disappears and I follow it.

WORLD GOING AWAY

This year they dread snow,
the distances it makes,
the way it dulls sounds,

the way they are supposed to like it,
the way they did like it once.

One morning they wake
to a window both dim and white.
The *thunk thunk* of shovel outside,
which went on and on in their sleep,
sounds like *shut shut*.

They were dreaming of a bare woods,
the cold sound of beating.

On their minds a set of tracks
rises to surface through snow.

BIRD COUNT

Choose a day: whatever birds come,
they're the ones, for this year.
If it's windy, multiply by two. (But what
if there's none, but might be? Mark *none*.)
Today there may be a song. Multiply:
"Two unknowns." But you are always
the same, no matter how windy or cold
it is. You search all the thickets, then walk
home through the fields at the end: just one.

A CEREMONY: DOING THE NEEDFUL

Carrying you, a little model carefully dressed
up, nestled on velvet in a tiny box,
I climb a mountain west of Cody. Often,
cut by snow, sheltering to get warm, I take
you out and prop you on the rocks, looking south
each time. You can see the breaks, down through cedars
to miles of tan grass. I put you back in the box
and hold you inside my coat. At the top I put you
wedged in a line of boulders, out of the wind.
It is very late by now, getting dark. I leave
you there. All the way down I can hear the earth
explaining necessity and how cold it is when you walk
away, even though you've done all you can.

THE GRASSHOPPER

The grasshopper took off
—he's still up.
Sunned and salted life. Barbles.
Frogs. Eggs, hawthorn, midge-clouds.
Carrot-rabbits. Everything in place!
The hares turn somersaults
even in the cemetery.
In the beginning: not the word but the ant,
a piercing light, a perseverance.
It's great to go three days
without poetry.
The reddest evening sky you can imagine
turns redder still.
The eye sees and the hand rubs out
The eye sees and the hand rubs out.
Till the eye sees and the hand is rubbed out.
Deep winter now and furry mitts. Skislopes.
The grasshopper — still up.

PORTRAIT

I know your address
but not where you live.
You aren't there
where your body is.
The outer light obscures
the inner face.
The conversation happens
at the side of your mouth.
You take a sip of water
from the side of the glass.
A strange plant,
no twig to be seen
where the blossom is.
It'll be a hard sitting.
Nevertheless, I'll try.

THE SNOWFLAKE

O to die like her, so quietly,
kith and kin flocked round,
thought the old woman.

Then the snowflake repented
and flew in backward somersaults
up to the roof-ridge
and in spirals round the weeping birch
before it sank again
past the empty window
in the empty house.

THE HOUSE SPARROW

The house sparrow, a strange bird.
It hides itself
like seeds in the field.
It has a great project on hand:
to live one day more and one night more
and one day more . . .

SHOES LONG TO BE OUT

Thunder, it was.
Stopped now.
A dog I don't have,
but wooden shoes I do.
They stand at the door
barking.

IF THERE WERE ONLY TWO WORDS

If there were only two words, ping and pong,
and ping meant heaven, pong earth?

He always has songs
who wants to sing.

Sometimes you're inside the city,
sometimes the city's inside you.

It can also be counted as music
when you hear a thud in the letter-box.

Not such bad painting when you drop the egg
and the yellow shows.

An evening prayer, perhaps:
Ping, let the sun's roundness last!

Pong wakens and:
the round sun has lasted.

translated by Robin Fulton

HOW IT'S BEEN

Saturday night, after the rage, it was Rome,
a friend's pictures, and I was there again,
after twenty years, the white ruins, the blue
sky and the light, the slight chill of March.
Freud in the lonely piazza, and Henry James:
'At last—I live!'

This is wrong.
It was Friday night. Saturday night was the man
from the city where I grew up, the older man
who knew the streets, the teachers, schools, who left
the party early, and then I couldn't speak,
my words were walls, and something not quite right
about Henry James.

On Sunday came the rage
again, another party, remembering now
to be still in the car, quiet at dinner, but earlier
in the day I couldn't read, I couldn't
read Freud, I couldn't remember, I couldn't read
the Sunday *Times*.

Monday, of course, was the first
warm day, the children's jackets hung on the fence
as I walked down the street to visit a friend,
and I took a wrong turn, and began to cry.
By then I'd thought of invasion. Someone foreign.
Raging. Strange.

Today it's warm again,
and blue, and I am unalive. I swam
in the pool and struck the water, I read and cursed
the words. Unalive, unalive, I can't

remember how long it's been, after all these years,
ten, twenty, is this myself, my mother,
my father, thirty years, I could strike I could hit
a child.

Tomorrow is Wednesday. I didn't mention
that Wednesday was fine, and Thursday night I slept
the whole night through, I felt no pain.
Something, then, about Rome, a slight chill
in the air. Freud and James and someone's father.
A street without a sign. And no one home.

373 EAST PARK STREET

The way I see it, he waves to a neighbor,
walking down Park, headed toward Peach,
where the girls are playing beside the house.

In the porch swing, her long black skirt,
her starched white blouse—

Shirtwaist, they called it.

—shirtwaist, yes, as he rises he touches her sleeve.

Now he opens the door and a girl cries out,
the oldest girl, and he walks by the parlor,
the grand piano draped with a shawl,
where the girl was practicing yesterday,
the only girl—

The only girl?

—the oldest girl, and the dining room window,
sansevierias growing in glazed pots.

Sansevierias?

Plants, then. She may have said ferns.
At least I know the blue pitcher,
the two blue glasses, patterned with grapes.

Now he halves the lemons, and thinks of the girl,
the girls who are playing beside the house.
Three more glasses. He hums as he stirs,
the piece she was practicing yesterday,
her white sleeves—

The girl's white sleeves?

Her white sleeves, in the porch swing.
The front door. How they bought the house.
The library table, the glassed shelves.
The clock in the parlor, the grand piano draped
with a shawl—

where the girl was practicing yesterday.

All right, yes. He's thinking of her,
his daughter, as if—

And you?

All right. Yes. Of someone else.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Remember the night you got drunk
and shot the roses?
You were a perfect stranger, Father,
even my bad sister cried.

Some other gravity,
not death or luck,
drew fish out of the sea
and started them panting.

The fish became a man.
The archer's bow became a violin.
I remember the night you searched the sofa
for change

and wept on the telephone.
Some other gravity,
not time or entropy,
pulled the knife down for centuries.

The archers dropped their bows,
harmless as pine needles in the snow.
The knife became a plow
and entered the earth, Father.

Later it became a boat
and some other things—
It wasn't a dream but it took a long time,
while the archer's bow became a violin.

Larry Levis

EDEN AND MY GENERATION

Note: *The following was delivered as a lecture at the Aspen Writers' Conference in July, 1980, at Aspen, Colorado.*

I. The Connoisseurs of Loss

At least since the Bible and Milton, much of English poetry has been preoccupied with the loss of Eden and the resulting knowledge which partially and paradoxically compensates for all solitary exile. But as myth became, in the artistic *and* general consciousness, more and more possible only in a radically *secular* way, poetry began to locate Eden, not in public myth, but in the privacy of personal experience, and to explore it in the lyric rather than the epic mode. Eden became a real *place;* it could be named, spoken of, lived in and remembered. The Romantic poets understood Eden, not as an elsewhere, but as a place inside the poet's own life. Wordsworth's landscape becomes, in his recollection, his private, unauthorized, unorthodox Eden. Yet Wordsworth's decision to *make* such a landscape Edenic is a compromise in which he stands, warily but finally, at the center.

In just this fashion, the named, autobiographical, particular *place,* whether Paumanok or Paterson or Big Sur or Vermont, became a way to locate the theme — became, as place, the new and personally experienced Eden. The poetry of my own generation, however, has been turning away or aside from such named, secular but sanctified places. Instead, it generalizes self-consciously about the Edenic theme of loss and exile. And with that change has come a corresponding change in language. This resistance to a resolutely imagistic, autobiographical poetry, and a preference for a more abstract, meditative mode of thinking testifies not merely to private loss, exile, and knowledge, but to a *collective and generational* loss, exile, and knowledge. The very language used has become increasingly less innocent, or such innocence increasingly less possible. In a way my generation has had to invent a way of thinking and a language which could not only record its losses, but could also question the motive behind every use of that language — especially its own. This need, how-

ever, is not only some necessary Oedipal and dialectal *agon* of one generation reproaching another. It is simply that for my generation there was no access *via* experience to the Eden of its parents. For to replace Eden in their own expressionist language is simply to mimic Eden or mock it. To find it is to find the words it needs in one's own time.

II. Place

Donald Hall begins an interesting essay on the nature of place in poetry with the following remarks:

> For some poets, poetry derives from a place. Poem after poem reaches back and touches this place, and rehearses experiences connected with the place: Wordsworth's "Nature"; the Welsh farms of Dylan Thomas; T. S. Eliot's St. Louis and Dry Salvages; Wallace Stevens' Florida; Walt Whitman and Paumanok; architectural Italy for Ezra Pound; Gloucester for Charles Olson . . . But I am not thinking only of poetry which is geographic or descriptive. I am thinking of places which to the poets embody or recall a spiritual state.[1]

But how do poems "embody or recall" these "spiritual" states? Hall's notions here have the flavor of truth, but perhaps it is wisest to realize these ideas specifically, as poems do. To begin with one personal example, the poet Gary Soto's San Joaquin Valley is the same geographical region I am from, and yet his experience of that place, both sacred and blasphemous, is that of a Mexican-American, and it is vastly different from my own experience of it as the son of a farmer, an "Anglo." In a way, we lived side by side, but in different worlds. Similarly, a few miles to the north in Fresno, David St. John was growing up, but into a place which even then considered itself a city. Against that more or less brutal and degenerating ambience, St. John refined his poetry, distilled it, into a bitter elegance. And ninety miles south, in Bakersfield, where *every* variety of vine refuses, finally, to grow, Frank Bidart must have been working. Talking once about his poems, and speaking in defense of their lack of imagery, their brazen love of the abstract statement, I found myself saying

that such an aesthetic as his could come only from Bakersfield, that the poems' lack of imagery resembled the impoverishment of their soil. I was naive, of course; it wasn't the poetry of Bakersfield; it was only the poetry of Bidart's *Golden State*. It is the geography of the psyche that matters, not the place.

And so a place in poetry, if it is good poetry, may be a spiritual state and not a geographic one. Compare, for example, T. S. Eliot's Gloucester with Charles Olson's. Similarly, my San Joaquin Valley is like no one else's, even though the same vineyards and towns may appear there. And obviously, a reader can't learn as much, factually, about a place from a poet as he can from a decent journalist. The place of a *poem* — Levine's Detroit; James Wright's Ohio; Lowell's Boston; the various Northwests of Gary Snyder, Carolyn Kizer, Richard Hugo, William Stafford, David Wagoner; Elizabeth Bishop's Nova Scotia — these are places we can never get to, and not simply because those places, every place, are subject to change and decay, or subject to that peculiarly ominous breeze at the end of Hugo's "Death of Kapowsin Tavern": "wind black enough to blow it all away." Rather, the poet has sealed those places away into the privacies of his or her work forever, so that, as William Gass observed, Joyce's Dublin is vastly superior to the *real* one. In a way, we can never get to those places because they don't exist — not really, anyway. But once, I tried to find such a place. I walked for days through Boston, wondering, idly, how it got there, and why. I did remember one line from Stevens: "The wise man avenges by building his city in snow." But mostly it was the grave, ruefully humorous poetry of Lowell's *Life Studies* that kept ringing quietly in my mind: "Boston's hardly passionate Marlborough Street" (which is actually a phrase Lowell borrows from William James) or "the trees with Latin labels" on Boston Common (they do have labels!). But then, to mimic Lowell, I was so out of things. At eighteen, I was so Californian I thought even Detroit was an "Eastern" city, and to discover Boston through Lowell was like trying to discover Italy through Ezra Pound. I felt like a tourist with one of the most idiosyncratic and beautiful guidebooks ever written. But I did feel like a tourist. *Life Studies* gave me a way to

feel a place which was not there anymore. It could never be there at all for me, really, for Lowell's Boston childhood and harrowing adult life consist primarily of what Bachelard would call "intimate" space — Lowell's poems usually occur in closed rooms, in privacies ("endurable and perfect") given up to him by his memory. It is not surprising that Lowell traces the inception of the first poem he wrote for *Life Studies* to the obsessive, recurring image of a "blue, china door-knob." And no doubt, by the time I arrived, someone else was living at 91 Revere Street. I don't know; I was too shy to go up and knock.

Place in poetry, then, or for that matter in much fiction, is often spiritual, and yet it is important to note that this spiritual location clarifies itself and becomes valuable only through one's absence from it. Eden becomes truly valuable only after a fall, after an exile that changes it, irrecoverably, from what it once was. When I returned to California in 1970 to teach, I returned to a withered Eden, and there was, all around me, even in the cool cynicism of stoned kids on Hollywood Boulevard, enough to confirm its demise. In one of his earlier poems, Robert Hass phrased that demise in strict couplets: "My God it is a test,/ This riding out the dying of the West." Fallen, I returned to my home, and, if I did not have any real vision then, I did have eyesight. I could *see* the place — that is one of the consequences of falling.

It is no wonder, then, that Donald Hall, in his essay, goes on to ask:

> What kind of place must it be? It must be a place where we felt free. It must be a place associated not with school or with conventional endeavor or with competition or with busyness. It must be a place, therefore, in which we can rehearse feelings (and a type of thinking) which belong in evolutionary terms to an earlier condition of humanity. And it is this earlier mind that we wish to stimulate, in poetry. Sometimes we speak as if we wish to return to it; actually, we want it to return to us, and to live with us forever. Therefore the place which is golden is a place where we have loafed and invited the soul, and where the ego — not yet born — has made no demands on the soul.[2]

Perhaps all of this *is* true, even the earlier mind theory, if only in

the substrata of the poet's memory. And yet the particular struggle, the *agon* and play which is a poem, usually records, laments, or testifies to our distance from this "golden place." That may be why, when Robert Hass writes a later and more analytical poem, "Meditation at Lagunitas," he begins by saying: "All the new thinking is about loss./ In this it resembles all the old thinking." It is almost as if, from "Tintern Abbey" to Lowell's "Grandparents," variations on the same theme were struck up, in different music, different chords. Even if we look at one of the most Edenic and pastoral of modern poems, Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill," the poet's final agony is apparent when he concludes: "And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land./ Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,/ Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea." It is only in his absence from such a farm that he can see its paradoxical meaning, that one is always in a state of becoming, and that one is always, also, becoming nothing. If we endure our Edens, Thomas says, and that is what we must do, all easy jubilation ends.

But suppose a poet does not leave his home, his place, does not fall from his Eden, but in fact seems to stay there, as James Wright seems to stay, through memory and imagination, in his native Ohio? But how can any Eden endure the Self? Much of the painful power and beauty in Wright's work comes from his witnessing the decay of his place:

> For a proud man,
> Lost between the turnpike near Cleveland
> And the chiropracters' signs looming among dead mulberry
> trees,
> There is no place left to go
> But home.

He has almost said, or he may as well have said: "There is no home left to go to." When we fall, we begin to know, we begin to see. To stay in that special, spiritual place is, simply, to watch its dismemberment through time. As we mature, or just grow older, we are given *sight*, or rather our memories give us a particularly subjective (hence objective and objectifying) ability to remember what once was in distinction to what is, at each moment, around

us. Such imagery, such memory and witnessing, affords the Ohio of James Wright much of its power. Even the place names, "Wheeling Steel," "Benwood," "Marion," participate in a past, not a present. The same is true of Lowell's *Life Studies*, Levine's *1933*, Gerald Stern's *Lucky Life*, Snyder's *Myths & Texts*, Bishop's *Geography III*, Robert Penn Warren's *Or Else* — the possible list is endless. Even if a poet chooses not to name his place, as Stanley Kunitz chooses in his poem, "Father and Son," the remembered place, the pond, becomes a radiance.

For many, of course, my idea of the Edenic will seem difficult to accept, or it will appear archaic, or merely silly. As a concept, it aligns itself so clearly to the Bible and to Milton that it seems permanently to recall its sources, and to recall orthodox conceptions of sin, guilt, death, sex, or at least the knowledge of these. But I intend the term only in its loosest, and perhaps most relevant, sense: that is, I may not believe in the myth of The Fall, but it is still possible for me to feel *fallen*. Why? Because I can see, and perhaps because the myth and the feeling is explainable as Freud explains it, in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

> Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the outside world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a more extensive feeling — a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world. If we may suppose that this primary ego-feeling has been preserved in the minds of many people — to a greater or lesser extent — it would co-exist like a sort of counterpart with the narrower and more sharply outlined ego-feeling of maturity, and the ideational content belonging to it would be precisely the notion of limitless extension and oneness with the universe — the same feeling as that described by my friend as "oceanic."[3]

Later elaborations of this, perhaps even Lacan's "stade du miroir" theory, attest to similar separations. In his essay on the growth of landscape painting, Rilke phrases the idea with a simpler grandeur: "For men only began to understand Nature when they no longer understood it; when they felt that it was the Other, indifferent towards men, without senses by which to

apprehend us, then for the first time they stepped outside of Nature, alone, out of a lonely world."

Poetry, the poetry of the spiritual place, can remind us, then, of the Edenic, even of the "oceanic." What seems to be a curious phenomenon of nineteenth and twentieth century poetry in particular is that the Edenic or "oceanic" is often retrievable only through a poem with a highly *specified* place: "Tintern Abbey"; "Little Gidding"; "Brooklyn Bridge"; "Patterson"; "Paumanok"; "Gloucester"; "Dover Beach;" the New Englands of Dickinson and Frost; the South of Dickey, Penn Warren, Tate, Jarrell, Ransom; Jeffers' Big Sur; Bly's Minnesota. This involvement with place, from Romantic and Modernist poets to the present, has come about in part I think because a poet wants to locate himself or herself somewhere, to be "a man (or a woman) speaking to men (or women)"; it is also a way of testifying to the demands and limitations of lyrical experience, to say: "I was the man, I suffered, I was there." The lyric wishes to be anti-dogmatic, non-didactic, *honest*. Williams articulated the idea this way: "It is in the wide range of the local only that the general can be trusted for its one unique quality, its universality." And "the local" is that vestige of the "oceanic" which Freud says we carry within ourselves, withered, out of childhood. And it *is there*, in the place recalled by the poet, the sacred home. It can't be otherwise, the poems seem to tell us — the holy place *is* a few miles above Tintern Abbey; or is just under a particular cedar growing in the place of a vanished New England farm town in Frost's "Directive"; or it is in the burned-out remains of Hugo's Kapowsin Tavern; or in Levine's unburned Detroit in 1952; or on a mountain top in the Cascades where Gary Snyder pauses, "between heaven and earth" before going down "to stand in lines in Seattle, looking for work." It will be there, or nowhere, the poems *deceive us* into believing. Actually, reading such poems, we discover, excavated by another's feeling, those places in ourselves.

*

However, I don't intend to suggest that poets write only about such places. They don't. And there are any number of

strong poets whom I cannot associate with any particularized place, such as Creeley, Strand, Ashbery, Rich, and Merwin. And yet because of the predominance of place, especially in American poetry of recent decades, it is only to be expected that a turning away from a particular, named, autobiographical poetry of place might occur, and this is what I believe is happening in the work of some of the younger poets writing now. I should say that this poetry, abstract or meditative as it might be, is not new, however – see Rilke and Stevens. And I also want to say that even when this poetry is at its most meditative, the inhabiting or recalling of a spiritual place continues, and without serious impediments. But first I think it is important to speculate, at least for my own purposes here, on what sort of shift has occurred, and to ask why it has occurred. For to turn away from one's own autobiographical, personal memory of a particular place is to appear, often enough, to have accomplished a dismissal of one tradition: that of the alienated, isolated artist.

And yet most younger poets still testify precisely to this alienation and isolation, this falling from Eden. Only they have changed it. It is as if the whole tradition has become, by now, shared, held in common, a *given* — or as if the poems confer the same sort of loss upon all of us, not only upon the privately suffering poet. And yet for a while, in the late sixties and early seventies in this country, it seemed to me that almost every American poem was going to locate itself within a more or less definite place, was going to be spoken usually in the first person singular, and would involve, often, the same kind of testimony to the poet's isolation. The problem of that poetic stance was, unfortunately, its real power — its irresistibly attractive, usually imagistic surface. So many young poets, responding honestly to the work of Bly, Wright, Snyder, Plath, Stafford or Merwin, tended to write poems that looked stylistically imitative, even derivative, of those and of other poets. That imitative gesture began to feel faint, inauthentic, often simply insincere or naive. And finally, as if in despair of recreating the reality of prior visions, this poetry often took on a sarcastic or sardonic attitude toward experience (some of the dark humor of James Tate and Bill Knott might be read as a visionary reaction to older poets) and

toward place itself, as in Cynthia MacDonald's funny satire of Bly's Midwest, in which an otherwise sensible young woman gives up her prior life, and, following Bly's advice, moves to South Dakota and spends the rest of her years working in a service station, far from anything except a randomly passing client. But many of the poems were not informed by any satirical purpose. They were *serious* and heartfelt. Even so, too many of the poems about Ohio or Illinois really began to merely anthologize a few clichés or commonplaces about the Midwest — clichés available to anyone who can read the cartoons in *The New Yorker*, or worse luck, *The Reader's Digest*. Often, the cartoons in *The New Yorker* at least were much more imaginative than some of the poems. The vast increase in small magazines, in the sheer number of them, seems in retrospect to have had nothing to do with authenticating American places: often the poets had no interest in becoming the mythographers of the place in which they happened to be, anyway, and so Gary Snyder's advice to this effect had little sway. What did this kind of poem typically look like? I will quote only one example, a poem called "Driving East," — I am withholding the name of the poet, however, because this is, for him, a very early poem, and because his later and more mature work seems to me very beautiful and haunting:

> For miles,
> the snow is on all sides of me,
> waiting.
>
> I feel like
> a lot of empty cattle yards,
> my hinges swing open to the wind.

Pretty, yes, but as a whole it is just too easy. Besides, hinges don't swing open to the wind; gates do. Too often the poet could look like a tourist dressed in some other poet's style, and style itself, as is usually the case in America, became too important. More seriously, place meant nothing very important to these poets, and nothing very spiritual, and such a poetry wasn't even "regional." The larger problem, obvious by now, was that there simply wasn't much experience or craft in poems such as "Toledo, Ohio, As Seen from the Balcony of the Holiday-Inn."

What had been a truly visionary prospect in the poetry of James Wright or Philip Levine became trivialized in the more immature imitations. But I am not maligning anyone, here, for being influenced. There probably isn't any other way to learn how to write poetry.

Still, so many of the poets of the sixties and seventies had no place to go — and no home worth returning to.

Again, in some unspecifiably social sense, it may be that places themselves became, throughout much of America, so homogenized that they became less and less available as spiritual locations, shabbier and sadder. A friend from Alabama once lamented to me that he had, as a young fiction writer, no South left to write about, that the topless bars and MacDonald's in Birmingham were like topless bars and MacDonald's everywhere. He could only imagine a South that had disappeared, and this was a literary South. But to create such an imagined place in spite of the reality around him would eventually make him participate in a merely literary regionalism. And the problem with a poem, or a story, that is strictly regional is its vulnerability (like those too numerous photographs of collapsed barns) to time. For example, it is still possible for me to admire Sandburg's "Chicago," but much of my admiration for it must be mixed with indistinct feelings of nostalgia, distrust, even embarrassment. Yes, I say, Chicago is strong, and its ugliness is a variety of the Beautiful, and yet it is impossible not to know that what Sandburg celebrates is as corny as it is destructive. The poem has matured into a period piece. With shrewder art, this is not the case. For example, old brick buildings in New York can seem charming to me, even powerfully evocative, but then I remember that they are so evocative in this very precise way because I am remembering Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, which is not, by the way, regional at all, but great. In a way, I don't, or can't, because of Hopper, see the place at all. Thus, sometimes, the world can turn comically into, and mimic, the art we thought was *about it*. But where the title of *regionalist* is conferred, isn't there a sense, too, of the anachronistic about the region, if not the artist? The regional dissolves almost too obediently into the

picturesque. So *Spoon River Anthology*, in which Masters is often brilliant, remains *regional*. It survives, but it survives, like any truly regionalist poem, like those curious museum towns in New England, like the Maine town in "Skunk Hour" which Lowell satirizes — what once was vital and real comes down to a matter of a few old buildings, kept chronically on display, and housing a boutique, a restaurant, or antique shops. In a way, the *patina* used by the regionalist resembles the renovations of the decorator: it obscures the place. And yet, I am not advising anyone to move into the extreme alternative; besides, no one, knowing what he or she cannot possibly not know about American cities today, could justifiably celebrate Chicago as Sandburg once could celebrate it. But then, poets don't necessarily celebrate Chicago or Denver or Los Angeles, they celebrate loss, they celebrate Eden — the myth of the place in the psyche.

Now it would be easy, and too convenient, to divide older and younger poets into two groups: older poets who appear to have places, and homes, and younger poets who are writing a more abstract, contemplative, unlocalized poetry. Any distinction along these lines would be sophomoric and wrong, however. There are many younger poets who identify themselves with one or more places, and who do this, who claim a place, in methods that renew the tradition of older poets. Robert Hass, Dave Smith, Carolyn Forché, Greg Pape, David St. John and Stanley Plumly are all poets whose work displays a strong attachment to place. Yet they are never limited *by* place, and often write a poem which could happen anywhere.

And yet, so many younger poets today seem to have no home worth returning to, or worth specifying in the way that Hass specifies the Bay area of California, or Gary Soto specifies the San Joaquin Valley, or Smith specifies his particular region of the South. Jon Anderson, Thomas Lux, Laura Jensen, Michael Ryan, Tess Gallagher, Daniel Halpern, Marcia Southwick, and so many others appear to have experienced a kind of orphaning by and in America. It may be that this experience, this new homelessness, is what a number of these new poets have in common when they practice the "meditational" mode — for what they

tend to hold in common is, at heart, a contradiction: an intimate, *shared* isolation. This isolation is a growth of all the older isolations, but the nature of it has been somewhat changed. Instead of the private loneliness of the first person point of view, there appears to be, even when unstated, a narrator who behaves as a "we" rather than an "I." Another distinction in this work is its reliance upon increasingly abstract statement and metaphors rather than upon image only. It is interesting to witness Robert Hass, a poet of place if there ever was one, in a sort of transition from one method to another. (I should note here, that many other poets are involved in the same kind of shift, and that it is dramatically obvious in David St. John's *Hush* and *The Shore*.) For what occurs in Hass's poem, "Meditation at Lagunitas," is memory, autobiography — but also the turning away of the poet from the place he confronts and from the poet he once was. It is as if the reader bears witness to a poet seeing through his own need for a place, for location. Truth is not at Lagunitas; it is within the meditation itself. And though this was always the case, Hass stresses it through the larger, abstract claims he makes in the poem.

MEDITATION AT LAGUNITAS

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice,*
pine, hair, woman, you and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding

her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure
boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver
fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled
bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as
numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

The focus of the poem throughout is either directly or tangentially upon the problem of language itself — its uses, its illusions. In this sense the poem's vision is only partly personal, for Hass' speculations come as much from philosophical considerations, from Lacan or Derrida, as from his own experience. In fact, I think Hass would stress, *does* stress in the poem, that thinking itself amounts to experience, to a life, just as any other thing we do — play, work, sex, talking — amounts to a life.

As *art* the poem is considerably calmer, seemingly more detached and reasonable in its phrasings than much of the poetry which flourished in the late sixties or early seventies. There is nothing very surreal in Hass's methods, no concern over a deepening image, and in the poem's imagistic modesty there may be even a buried admonition (if only to the poet himself) that the impulse and gesture which can willfully create a wild imagery for its own sake is perhaps not worth the trouble, is perhaps even aesthetically disingenuous or dishonest. The gain of such a calm is real: the poet is free of what Stevens called "the pressure of reality," and he is at least allowed a place for meditation. The poem resists mere autobiography through a rapt, abstract energy or impulse. Hass has no sooner introduced the woman

into his poem than she is, at least until his conclusion, dismissed. For a moment she even turns into a *law*: "Longing, we say, because desire is full/ of endless distances. I must have been the same to her." But Hass is so conscious of what he is doing! He is conscious enough, even, to distrust the very method of thinking which has afforded his poem, and so, at poem's end, he returns to the truth of remembered, personal experience; then, characteristically, revealingly, he generalizes such experience: "Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,/ saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*"

And yet how traditional Hass' poem is in its use of a spiritual place! Hass' river, the river of his childhood, provides the same Eden any other poem might. It is much more modest, of course, than Wordworth's Wye, and it appears, as Hass mentions it so casually, even minimal, a random memory, though it is not. What is a little surprising, however, is the way in which Hass suppresses the name of that river, Feather or Sacramento, from his poem. Why? It is obvious that the name of the river does not figure importantly in his purposes here, and yet the fact that it does not is, to my way of thinking, full of implications. To name a place, in memory, is to singularize the Self, to individuate the Self, and to maintain belief in the power of the place *through* its name. But the intimation of this poem as a whole suggests that the New Intimacy of Hass or of other poets now working has gone or is going beyond the need for specified locations, and that naming itself, as a first human and poetic act, is what Hass is analyzing here into a sensuous mystery. For the entire, final burden of the poem depends on its success in reminding us that speech is pleasure, and that, paradoxically, the repetition of a word actually empties that word of meaning, of association — which is Hass' earlier fear in the poem. A place, any place, therefore, could be said only to exist *after* language itself, and to be anterior to language, or created by it. Hass' poem intends, like so many poems since the Romantics, to create the same spiritual place, but Hass is more aware of his traditions, of exactly what he is doing, and it is this which allows him to suggest that we are baptized, not into a location, not into any body of water, but into

names, into a river of names. "A word is elegy to what it signifies" because the word is a reality as much as its referent. The new thinking about loss resembles the old thinking about loss exactly through the use of language, through poetry. The more we try to return to the Edenic place, the more our methods, our words, lock us out and turn the pain of our collective separation and exile into poetry. This is not exactly a victory, the poem reminds us, because you can't make love to a poem, and, in "Meditation at Lagunitas," it is sex that recalls Eden more honestly, more innocently and inarticulately, than art does.

And ultimately, a conscious attending to a collective loss is a little different from an attention to a private or confessional loss, even though the same sympathies may occur, finally, as a product of the poem. This poetry, as Stanley Plumly so rightly observed, is often haunted by an Idea more than an Image, a Mind more than a Life. There is a steadiness of control about it, and a poet like Jon Anderson is fond of collapsing private griefs and the singularity and isolation of the poet by stressing, in his own rather austere loneliness and alienation ("My grief is that I bear no grief/ And so I bear myself"), how deeply such loss is intimately shared by others: "My friends and I have all come to the same things." In another poem, while passing houses at night, he says: "Each had a father./ He was telling a story so hopeless,/ So starless, we all belonged." Below the "I" in Anderson's work there is often the abstract argument of a "we" — friends and loved ones. This "we" never lets us forget our participation in the poem, our inclusion by *it*.*

These distinctions can be clarified or thrown into higher relief more or less simply, I think. When Robert Lowell writes, in "Memories of West Street and Lepke":

* Note: I notice that Ira Sadoff, in his article on meditative poetry (*APR*, September/October, 1980) uses the same examples of Hass and Anderson for his argument. I think it is curiously substantiating that both of us, two poets working unbeknownst to each other, should come up with the same examples.

> Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
> in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
> I hog a whole house on Boston's
> "hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"

he is intimating, through the naming of a place a private, autobiographical experience. Its virtues are very much like those of Realism in fiction. He is saying, like Huck Finn, *this is what happened to me*. His narration will be, therefore, modest, insular, unpretentious, without a sermon for the reader. The reader can respond to the honesty or sincerity of that first-person pronoun, that "I." If a poet says, on the other hand, "Much that is beautiful must be discarded/ So that we may resemble/ A taller impression of ourselves" our whole experience of the poem will be dramatically different, and we will be much more aware that the poet (John Ashbery), in his choice of method, is both criticizing the alternative and more personal mode at the same time he is admonishing his audience, through his collaborative theme, against the choice, suicide, which the character in his poem has made. In a larger, historical sense, I am aware that both of these methods, in varying degrees of popularity and use, have always been at large in poetry. And of course as *methods* both are very much in use now, and neither one is superior, as an aesthetic choice, to the other. But they are different. Why have so many younger poets now working adopted the latter, the second method? It is often suggested that the influence of Ashbery has had something central to do with this, but I have my doubts that this is entirely true. I think that all of us, finally, live and have to live within a much larger and more various culture than the culture of poetry, and it is impossible for me to forget that most younger poets came of age in the late sixties and early seventies, a time of real trouble in America. What I most remember, and what seems to me most valuable, even though it is now a subject of easy satire, is the sense of shared convictions and tenderness among my generation at that time. There was, for a while, a feeling of community, however frail or perishable, which mattered, and which is not apparent in the *chic* lame, New Left political rhetoric of the time — a frustrated rhetoric. So often what one felt as shared or

communal could not quite be spoken or brought into speech, much less into poetry. Poets of an older generation, responding to that era and those pressures, wrote mostly out of singular agonies. If they were excessive at times in their use and dependence upon hyperbole and imagery, I think that the sheer ugliness of U.S. foreign policy might have had as much to do with that as the influence of Latin American translations. Often the insistence, in their work, on the beauty of the wild or surreal was a reflex of their anger. In retrospect, I think that what the poets of my generation experienced was not only a deep suspicion of any easy political rhetoric, but a suspicion of what began to seem to be poetical rhetoric as well, of a mannered imagistic poem which effectively kept the poet away from his or her experience. And if that generation felt an enormous disillusionment with the society itself, it felt, also and finally, an equally real disappointment with itself and with its inability to do the impossible task which it had promised itself to do, to reconstruct an Edenic place out of America. I have a clear memory of walking on a cold, winter day through the Haight-Ashbury district in 1970 — a place that looked as if it was being evacuated before an approaching army. But there was no army coming. No one, anymore, was coming. There were only young men in pairs who would pass by on each side of me, asking if I wanted to buy acid or speed. The place looked, as someone said, like "a teen-age slum." And the subsequent phenomenon of hip boutiques in suburban shopping centers was not a solution to any problem; it was merely a betrayal of values, and a continuance (how could it be otherwise?) of capitalist culture. When Vietnam ended, my generation appeared, oddly enough, to be so much a part of the culture it had resisted. It was like America, or it was America. Without an enemy, it could not continue.

If the "we" of the younger poets is a plural pronoun, it is also obsessed with loss, but I think it is a loss more profound than the loss of political goals or partisan feelings. Part of what got lost is the possibility of wholly believing in the grand fiction of Romantic alienation and individuation. And yet the new poetry, the "meditative" poetry, appears to be an outgrowth of the more

isolated imagistic thinking, and its subject, like that of its parents, is precisely that same testimony to alienation and loss. But it is a collective loss more than a private one. It would be comforting to think that even *collective*, as used here, might have some vestigial political significance, but the loss usually attested to has little to do with political solutions. In fact, the poems seem intensely wary of any political diction, seem to avoid it with great skill, for to locate one's loss in political terms is to locate it within time. But the loss and fall from the Edenic place is final, mythic, a thing that cannot be changed. To talk of it, to talk of some collective loss, means, quite possibly, to deflect one's attention from the subject which provokes the poem. In Marvin Bell's poem, "Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See" the *ut pictura poesis* of *La Grande Jatte* is both oblique and searingly personal.

> They sat by the water. The fine women
> had large breasts, tightly checked.
> At each point, at every moment,
> they seemed happy by the water.
> The women wore hats like umbrellas
> or carried umbrellas shaped like hats.
> The men wore no hats and the water,
> which wore no hats, had that well-known
> mirror finish which tempts sailors.
> Although the men and women seemed at rest
> they were looking toward the river
> and some way out into it but not beyond.
> The scene was one of hearts and flowers
> though this may be unfair. Nevertheless,
> it was probable that the Seine had hurt them,
> that they were "taken back" by its beauty
> to where a slight breeze broke the mirror
> and then its promise, but never the water.

Deflection? The name of a river. What matters is that the poem withholds its private sufferer, its poet, so that the place can be seen, and the common misery of the inhabitants can be seen: "it was probable that the Seine had hurt them," because the place is the location of their loss. The figures in the painting, the withheld figures they stand for, can not quite understand the nature

of their loss, and so blame it on the Seine, deflect what they can no longer articulate onto the river, the place itself which changes and does not change, but does not undergo the final change of the observers, those whose promise is broken by nothing outside themselves as they are reminded of it by something as ordinary as a "slight breeze."

What is it, then, that one loses? That everyone loses? Where I grew up, the specific place meant everything. As a child in California, I still thought of myself, almost, as living in the Bear Flag Republic, not in the United States. When I woke, the Sierras, I knew, were on my right; the Pacific was a two hour drive to my left, and everything between belonged to me, *was* me. I was astonishingly sheltered. It was only gradually that I learned the *ways* in which place meant everything, learned that it meant 200 acres of aging peach trees which we had to prop up, every summer, with sticks to keep the limbs from cracking under the weight of slowly ripening fruit. It meant a three-room schoolhouse with thirty students, and meant, also, the pig-headed, oppressive Catholic church which, as far as I could determine, wanted me to feel guilty for having been born at all. And it meant the gradual self-effacement and aging of my parents. Even in high school when I began to write, even when I hated the place most, and when I rejoiced when I read that Rimbaud (at fourteen!) called his home town of Charlesville a "shit-hole" — even when the desire to get away was strongest, I was dimly aware that my adolescent hatred of the place was transforming it, was slowly nurturing an Eden from which I was already exiling myself. After I had left for good, all I really needed to do was to describe the place exactly as it had been. That I could not do, for that was impossible. And that is where poetry might begin.

NOTES

1. Hall, Donald, "The Poet's Place," in *Goatfoot Milktongue Twinbird*, p. 205-207.
2. Hall, p. 207.

3. Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 15.

SOURCES

Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1962.

Hall, Donald, *Goatfoot Milktongue Twinbird*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978.

Dennis Schmitz

ATTIC

Mice, their eyes studded
by a 40-W attic bulb

or barn swallows spread out against
one small hole, tearing

themselves to get in.
I'm belly-down on splintery board

without a shirt, balancing over rafters;
sometimes up to my wrist in cellulose

& rat-dirt I touch National
Geographics or the cardboard violin-case

webbed to 2x10s, scrape the bloodied
overhead where I have to writhe

to get under while my wife
below, the ceiling plaster sounding

between us, hoppegs then redoes Chopin's
black-key Etude. I change

hands when she does, sweating
at the *forte*; in tandem we release

one hold for the next
in my secret crawl to the cupola.

Every time I see more,
the cupola's shutters one by one

ascending my face until my eyes
are clear: a kind of helmet

I grow into, the outside laddered,
inimical. The music rippling thru me.

STRAYS

Long after the bee dies
the sting melts in the wound:
1961, impatient Anne,
our firstborn, teething on bagels—
you took up her cry
denying nothing,

even dawn could not come
between you in your common song.
I heard you
800 miles away when I called

collect to tell you this story
I couldn't end
with the irony that would let me
come back shaking chiggers out of my clothes,
shower with you,
unafraid to eat dirt, the last darkness,
under the nails as I claw

two baloney sandwiches & an apple
southeast of Kearney,
the one road flexing with heat-pools.
From horizon to horizon

the eye never touches down.
My only ride in five hrs
comes at a one-pump truck stop—
a drug co. pick-up delivering lab animals.
The driver in fatigue blues has me sit
with them, share
cages, rather crates of voiceless strays,
their vocal cords cut, he says,

so they will not rouse or confuse
one another.
After he has coffee & I try to call,
I wedge myself between tailgate & crates,
legs around pack & down-bag,

my arms free for tenderness.
As we shake & sway into the curves,
I poke between the cage slats,
let one mongrel gum my fingers—
it's love-hunger, his milk-teeth won't break skin.
I have nothing to give him

that is not my own discontent,
that is not this plunge over a dirt track

to the driver's white clapboard house,
improbable, neat, in a stand of poplars.
Halfway across the yard
his wife meets him with some forgotten papers.

Suspicious but overpowered,
she will not look at me
because the thing is compounded by my fright.
The driver will not notice
the trill of the insects (it is evening),
the grinding tires,
as he horses the truck around in gravel.

Marianne Boruch

I PUT ON MY JONATHAN EDWARDS THIS APPLE SEASON

There it is, simplifying the table, everyone
sitting down to apple pie, a pie
reaching back beyond the crust of human anything,
a pie of knowledge we invented words for: *knife fork pie tin.*
But I put on my Jonathan Edwards & sit
alone, October 23, 1749.
What does it take really, to see
the wolf in that bewildered docile dog
sleeping near the fire. I pick up the napkin again, think
fear fear in that dog's eye
as the wolf creeps unsteadily
from the doggy heart... The whole
country, sitting down this minute
a sliver, à la mode, with cheddar. O Ancestor,
lowered right now from the tree, a thought
wrenched from the gloom & glowing darker.

THE FURNITURE OF LIGHT

I sit down in the furniture of light
& seem to fall asleep, except that weird noise,
that rustling. Perhaps this isn't
sleep at all but the future
dimly revealing its marvelous pajamas.
I like those stripes really, how
they taper down
to the delicate ankle. I've seen
that ankle before. I raise my pantleg
with trepidation. No— maybe
Auntie Arnita of the butterscotch brownies,
maybe Mrs. Waxworth of St. Eugene's school.
First Grade! My little desk. I could weep
thinking of Bumpo, my guardian angel
sharing my seat. How ugly he was, how kind
offering me the true pencil, and that half
of his sandwich, its funny glow. What a brat
I'd become even then, squeamish, shaking my head,
heart exploding nothing, ribs falling apart. Idiot!
Think if I had eaten the thing. Now
what flowers would pass into thoughts,
what blooming rapture. All this saddens
before me, a soggy parade, colors
running from the crepe into the city drains.
I sink down into the furniture, getting
sleepy all over again, and the rustle
of pajamas, something
familiar, above the 7-11, on such
a quiet street. Wingbeats! Oh Bumpo...
in a minute, any minute, and me
suddenly so sleepy, these windows darken
with a monstrous light.

Charles Simic

PUNCH MINUS JUDY

A row of mostly X-ed out windows,
One of them intact, open and darkly curtained,
Five stories up,
Where the elevated train slows down for a curve.

I glimpsed the world's skinniest arm
Coming between the slits, palm up,
To catch a drop of rain
At the sound of distant thunder.

Or another time, in a last bit of sultry daylight,
I saw two, cut-off at the elbows,
A small, naked babe
Raised in them, to breathe, briefly,

Above the boarded grocery store,
The three men drinking on the sidewalk,
The fourth one moving off, gimplegged, muttering to himself,
I suppose, at the puppetry of it all!

"FOXES FALL TO ST. FRANCIS"

"Religion," said the foxes
"is for the birds.

And that man in the brown gown
is a hunter. Watch out."

The sparrows watched him
bake bread and sow crumbs

and the snow kept falling.
He seemed too weak

to make a meal of sparrows
and too dumb.

No claws, no beak,
a nest without young.

He trapped roots, berries,
chestnuts,

and the snow kept falling
(also the sun).

Many birds drew near
and admired his peculiar singing,

and he kept scattering seeds,
and badgers and hares drew

themselves up
to his stone table.

He ate only his words.
The snow kept falling

on the food,
on the far-off dead,

on paths paved
with mercy.

The foxes said,
"What's good enough for birds

is good enough."
And they fell on the feast

and were saved.

"FIELD COLLAPSES BEHIND PATULLO"

The First Scroll

To the chief eunuch of her Imperial Majesty
Marco Polo said,

"My country lies under yours.
If you dig a hole in your garden
you'll find me feeding the birds in mine.
Farewell!"

In the fourth moon, he weeded the lotus pond.
In the seventh moon, he cut the chrysanthemums.
In the ninth month he covered their roots for the winter.
Farewell!

West of the Jade Girdle Bridge,
north of the Gate of White Peonies,
he dug a way out
from the ten thousand peacocks wanting their own way,

from the lotus, twisting its feet in the shallows
and the lizards like jokes cracked by an emerald.

Farewell.

The Second Scroll

When this eunuch died, another replaced him.
He, too, dug quietly toward the promised land.
The eunuch of the twenty-fifth generation
barely remembered the story.

What did he know of Marco Polo?
What did he know of New Jersey
and Patullo the chicken farmer, profoundly unlucky,
who on the sixth hour of the seventh moon

quarreled with his wife
and stomped toward the barn, with her calling
Go to hell
as the shovel broke through like a tooth

and the whole field collapsed behind him?

AS THE REEL TURNS

At ten the siren warns us to stop
what we are doing and remember the dead
whom nobody warns.

They are not listening.
They could be nodding there forever
in Lvov, Vilna, Bialystock, plucking
their kosher chickens, dealing
in second-hand pants or salt herring.
It is the summer of 1939.

All those couples strolling as the reel turns
in the gardens of the Duke's palace,
blinking in the strong light.

All those children stretched out at rest time
on the lawn of the Workers' Summer Camp
with their sticky fingers.

A man sleeps on a bench in the park
as if he owned it, as if
he might wake up out of the movie
opulent in California.

There are lace curtains in the windows
of Dr. Zammenhof's house
through which the sun cuts holes
in the universal language.

A woman arranges the blanket
over her baby in the carriage.
How careful she is
to get the edges straight.

THE BLUE SHIRT

See that man with the basket
of fruit and vegetables.

You mean by the Roman arch?

The one with the blue shirt
and sandals.

By the Sixth Station of the Cross?

With the child eating a banana.

Where Veronica wiped the sweat
from His face with her handkerchief?

No. No. The blue shirt,
the basket of vegetables.

THE DOME

Stressed essentials. So nothing
collapses from its own weakness.
As in the Duomo.
Brunelleschi dreamed his miracle
out of an egg.

Or the Dome of the Rock
with its flickering sky
I look up at.

The hairs of Mohammed's beard
are under glass. And his footprint
stays in the stone
where he flew to heaven.

I move in a circle on my bare feet
looking for signs, one shred
from the wing of the angel
who stopped the knife.

All day my head spins
in a great hollow. Bearing it up.

INTERFERON

Always just one demon in the attic.
Always just one death in the village. And dogs
howl in that direction, while from the other way
the newborn child comes, just one,
to fill the empty space in the big air.

Likewise, cells infected by a virus
send signals out, defenses
are mobilized, and no other virus
gets a chance to settle down
and change the destiny. This phenomenon
is called interference.

And when a poet dies, deep in the night,
a lone black bird wakes up in the thicket
and sings for all it's worth,
while a black rain trickles down
like sperm or something,
the song is bloodstained, the suffocating bird
sings perched on an empty thorax
where the imaginary heart
wakes up to face its forever interfering
futility. And in the morning, the sky's swept clean,
the bird's sleepy, the soil's fertilized,
and the poet is gone.

In Klatovska Street, in Pilsen,
by the railway bridge, there was
a small shop that sold quilts and comforters.
In times when what is needed
is a steel cover for the whole continent,
the quilt business is slack.
The shopkeeper was in trouble.
In such times men of the world
usually turn to art.

In the big shop window
the shopkeeper built
a cottage of quilts and comforters
and staged a performance every night
about a quilted cake-house and a red-quilted
Little Red Riding Hood, while his wife,
in this stuffed masquerade,
played the wolf or the witch,
and he was the padded Hansel,
Gretel, Red Riding Hood or Granny.
To see the two old people
crawling in monstrous floods of textile
around the plump cottage
was not unambiguous.
It was something like the life
of sea cucumbers in the mud
under a cliff. Outside
the surf of war roared and they
carried on their puffy
pantomime, out of time and out of action.

Children used to watch from the street
and then go home. Nothing was sold,
but it was the only pantomime around.

The black bird sang
and the rain poured into the thorax
marked with the Star of David.

But in the actors under the quilts,
l'anima allegra must have woken up
at that moment, so that,
sweating and rapt, they played
the undersea *commedia dell'arte*
thinking there was no backstage
until a scene was over, moving jerkily
from shopwindow to cottage and back,

with the gaiety of polio-stricken Columbines,
while the sound of drums and bugles never reached them.

Or else they thought such a deep
humiliation of old age
and its traditional dignity
interfered with the steps
of men in leather coats
and departures of trains
for human slaughterhouses.
It did.

The black bird sang
and the ravaged sclerotic hearts
hopped in their chests,
and then one morning they did not play,
did not raise the shutters,
the sky was swept clean, the soil fertilized,
the comforters confiscated for the eastern front
and the actors transferred to
the backstage of the world
called Bergen-Belsen.
In place of the quilt shop now
a greengrocer peddles rubbery kohlrabis.

Always just one death in the village.
Always just one demon.
How great is the power of the theater, even if
it ends up collapsing
and vanishing backstage.

Dogs howl in that direction.
And the butterfly pursues
those who stole the flowers.

When we did autopsies
at the psychiatric ward in Bohnice,

in air thick with the urban pollution
of relative futility,
the car would pull up before the barracks
and the inmates would wave
some sort of Labor Day parade flags
from the windows
as one went, hugely alone,
to the solitary mortuary
beyond a grove of trees
where the naked bodies
of ancient schizophrenics
waited, along with two live inmates,
one pulling the corpses up from the basement
on a dumbwaiter and putting them gently
on tables, as a mother would
her unbaptized child,
the other lurking in a dark corner
with a pen dipped in ink
to write the Latin protocol,
his spelling faultless,
and nobody uttering a sound, only
the moan of the elevator shaft . . . and the knife
slicing the epidermis and dermis made
a sound like tearing silk . . . and it was always
powerful and unprecedented pneumonias
and tumors big as dragon's eggs,
the rain soaked the thorax
and in the roaring silence
one had to break the line of an angel's fall
and dictate the logical sentence
for the ghoul, doomed ages ago . . .
and the schizophrenic's pen in the corner
diligently scratched the paper
like an eager mouse.

We need no prompter,
the puppets said proudly.

The air of this anatomic theater
was filled with interferon,
it was a spectacular personal charge
against the malignant growth, it was
a general amnesty of walls, entropy
was forsworn for the moment,

because there are no bubbles at the bottom
to be cracked by the breeze.

The red balloon outside
soared to the unseen heaven, its chains
stretched by knowing
the nearer the inferno
the greater the paradise,
the nearer the prison cell
the greater the freedom.

Cantabit coram latrone omne vacuus viator.

And that is the fierce essence of the theater,
when the actor stripped of everything
rises to the top of the conflagration
and everything else is hushed
like a much-hunted animal
with muscles still trembling
but with endorphines
and an immense peace in the brain.

Yes, even a whale will sometimes leave the herd
to hurl itself into shallow water and die in the sun
like a collapsed cathedral, with a pushed-out penis,
and death is buried instantly
in a tiny grain of sand
and the sea is laughing.

Ask felled trees; in broken speech
they preach about saplings. In the galactic
jargon of white dwarves
stars of the main sequence
shine forever.

In the non-Euclidean curved space
which passes comprehension as
the interference of the theater does,
you hear forever the voices of children
from the elementary school of death,
children from kitchen puppet tragedies,
and children from military junkets
when spearing and subsequent flinging of legs
was something like curry,
the condiment of mercenary marches,
voices of children passing comprehension —

But we washed behind our ears,
we didn't pull the cat's tail,
we haven't put
our fingers into sockets —

What else is left
in the universe of hominization
slow as the decay of tritium,
except learning about the growing shame of demons —
since the time of the Aztecs, high priests
haven't presented offerings while dressed
in the skin of a freshly skinned prisoner.

We need no prompter, said —

One Christmas, a drunk
dressed up as a devil
fell down the stairs and lay there,
and a child, experiencing

that embarrassing joy just inches from fright,
ran out, upon hearing the noise, and called —

Mummy, come here, there's a dead devil —

And he was, although the actor got up
after another sip. Maybe dogs howled,
but only by a dark mistake.
The stars of the main sequence shone,
the bird was about to sing in the saplings,
the child trembled a little
from the chill of three million years,
in the big air, and was told,
poetically,

it's all just a game,
look, the butterfly's bringing
the flowers back . . . and
there's no other devil . . . and
the nearer the paradise . . .

It believed and it didn't —

translated by Dana Hábová and David Young

POETRY 1981: THREE REVIEW ESSAYS

Heather McHugh, **A World of Difference** (Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
Gerald Stern, **The Red Coal** (Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
Mark Jarman, **The Rote Walker** (Carnegie-Mellon, 1981).

Strange forked animal that notices a calf's head only when it has two of them, or that assumes a glint of foil on the ground is an empty gum wrapper. The strange facts that all calves have their mooing and their chewing at the same end and that foil still glints after its purpose is gone don't occur to us. Unique strangeness is brief and rare compared to the continuous strangeness of the habits and bodies we live in. Poems are not needed to bottle freaks, but they are needed to shake foil. It is this "shining from shook foil," this necessary strangeness in the *ordinary* that I look for in each new book of poems. This year Heather McHugh, Gerald Stern, and Mark Jarman have all shaken foil for me.

Heather McHugh's subjects and themes make the success of her poems especially dependent on strangeness. Though the title of the book is *A World of Difference*, she looks at the same old world. Individual poem titles are often familiar abstractions: "Goods," "Conception," "Brightness," "Mind," "Elevated," "Damage," "Elemental," "Form." The poems examine familiar situations: first love, turning thirteen, contemplation of a starry night, drifting into extreme age, needing a lover, knowing a lover. Her reactions to these situations are not unusual: love burns, convention cripples, insight dims certainty, childhood is infinite possibility, first love is joy, later love is a "bare necessity," Bishop Berkeley's wrong, God is human, death is a long forgetting. But the poems rediscover each of these truths and cause readers to rediscover them for themselves. Her method is chiefly a rhetoric of abruptness: lean poems, mostly short, sparing of words and images, creating surprise by puns, oxymoron, twisted clichés, deformed quotations, strategies of syntax. For example, she reverses two words in a cliché: "the man who had/ his way with the dark in her." Or she substitutes a word opposite to the expected one: "yell to low heaven!" Or she puts the expected

words into an unexpected context: "having hired/ the vehicle and tenor" or God "had no bailiwick,/ no friends in higher places;/ he hadn't an inkling, a sou." She uses frequent puns: "a little man in each refrigerator,/ Making light of cold" or "I am right. You/ are left." Oxymoron: "precisely wild." False coordination: "Of course you couldn't stand/ the sight, your ground." Calculated ambiguity: "my five hired fellow-specialists/ were taping their abstracts/ to the window. Soon it would be dark" or "You aim your gun at the trembling/ hill, and want the world to break/ / from cover."

These devices are not the tricks they might be if used by a less skilled poet or one who saw no essential strangeness in the ordinary. In "The Field," for instance, the pun in "Soon it would be dark" is the inevitable climax to a series of small shocks not apparent in the mundane situation implied by "study in the field," but inevitable in a fresh personal scrutiny of almost anything. Compared with such concreteness, any *abstract* would obscure light and create darkness:

THE FIELD

It was my day to study
in the field. I found
fences strung with glass beads,
small possessions of shock,
the farms of his and hers.
I couldn't make myself at home.
I lowed so the cow would
but the cow looked up, misquoted.
When I got back to the house
my five hired fellow-specialists
were taping their abstracts
to the window. Soon it would be dark.

In "Stall" the first four lines describe a woman going into a traditional red barn full of cattle; then, by a sleight-of-pun on *stand*, these cattle become all stalled creatures in all their lifelong

futility of patience. The second stanza shows that the woman believes in end, change, and choice: "but then," in the last stanza, she realizes that past choice (if it be choice) has decided future choice as well. The "dark in her" was there "for good." The ambiguity of *good* and *dark* have made us look twice at those two words and thus jerked us to awareness that a good may be long and dull or instant and bright, but it is also dark and forever. A neat trick that, but it is life's trick, not Heather McHugh's.

STALL

Through memory and actual
mud, the woman approaches
the deep red barn
where animals stand
for anything — for years
of food, for good.

The woman is looking forward
to the day when everything is clear.
She thinks she's due for sunlight,
free from kin, but then

a moan from a downwind stall
reminds her of the man who had
his way with the dark in her.

In the poem "Like" McHugh speaks directly of her concern that words which convey the obvious must be made to touch the strangeness in the obvious: "Always I have to resist/ the language I have/ to love. This is my work,/ / . . . life/ / will not be memorized./ . . . always the animals fall in love/ / but always like never before."

Gerald Stern's poems in *The Red Coal* are longer and wider than McHugh's and thick with detail. He finds the contradictions of the quotidian to be a rich soup, and he savors every spoonful. He is aware of pathos and cruelty and courage in the sweatiest

people and the most smeared places, but his dominant tone is enjoyment, a strange reaction in a century when the weary alienation of the poet is a cliché. Stern's method seems exuberantly artless. He puts one object or circumstance or creature next to another so unlikely that both seem absurd; then, when he has surprised us by one such coupling, he adds another and another or elaborates the first two so that they become even more ridiculous. The result is a *reductio* or *inflatio ad absurdum*, done to an extent that can only be relished. Yet this deliberate bizarreness implies ultimately serious, often stark, though often overlooked, philosophical truths: The mind is not a bit of blown paper, it's a squirrel caught under a giant truck. The human dream of the golden age is a swan wishing it could retro-evolve into a pterodactyl. The poet's straining Muse is a fallen angel who grows dizzy every time he tries to climb a ladder. Stern and an apprentice are learning the love of labor and the labor of love by transplanting a pine tree. His fellow worker is a monkey. His poem on Ruskin is addressed to a mole. But one must examine a whole poem to see how the strategy works:

FOR NIGHT TO COME

I am giving instructions to my monkey
on how to plant a pine tree. I am telling
him to water the ground for hours before
he starts to dig and I am showing him
how to twist the roots so the limbs will bend
in the right direction.
                He is weeping
because of the sweet air, and remembering
our canoe trip, and how we went swimming
on Mother's Day. And I am remembering
the holiness and how we stopped talking
after we left Route 30. I show him the tree
with the two forks and the one with the
stubs and the one with the orange moss
underneath, and we make our nest in a clearing

where the wind makes hissing noises and the sun
goes through our heavy clothes.
All morning we lie
on our backs, holding hands, listening to birds,
and making little ant hills in the sand.
He shakes a little, maybe from the cold,
maybe a little from memory,
maybe from dread. I think we are lost,
only a hundred yards from the highway,
and we will have to walk around in fear,
or separate and look for signs before
we find it again.
We pick a small green tree,
thick with needles and cones and dangling roots,
and put it in the trunk on top of the blanket,
and straighten the branches out, and smooth the hairs.
All the way back we will be teary and helpless,
loving each other in the late afternoon,
and only when we have made the first cut
and done the dance
and poured in the two bushels of humus
and the four buckets of water
and mixed it in with dirt and tramped it all down
and arranged and rearranged the branches
will we lie back and listen to the chimes
and stop our shaking
and close our eyes a little
and wait for night to come
so we can watch the stars together,
like the good souls we are,
a hairy man and a beast
hugging each other in the white grass.

In the first paragraph the speaker gives the exact nursery directions for planting a pine tree — but he gives them to a monkey. In the second the monkey becomes a lover who shares drippingly sentimental memories of a canoe trip with the

speaker. In the third paragraph they hold hands like lovers and share a fear that they are lost from the highway. In the last they dig up, transport, and plant the tree with due ritual and take comfort together for the task completed, the work well done. Only then, I think, do we remember the title. This is not a sick or silly romp or even an unusual satire, but a perfectly serious restatement that the man-made invention of ritual work is all that he can comfort himself with in a universe that has no clear use for him. The speaker is alone. The monkey is only himself. So, we've been told again that we're alone in the universe. But what fun and what astonishment in the process of rediscovery.

In "Immensity" Stern, like Heather McHugh, states, while demonstrating, his poetic theory: "Nothing is too small for my sarcasm./ . . . I will examine my life through curled threads/ and short straws and little drops of food./ . . . This is the way to achieve immensity, and this is the/ only way to get ready for death, no matter what Immanuel Kant/ and the English philosophers say about the mind."

Where McHugh uses wit and Stern levity to make us perceive strangeness by indirection, Mark Jarman is direct. He is a serious person who thinks we will find enough strangeness to jerk us aware if we just look more closely at what we have seen so many times before that we now take it for granted. So he looks again and discovers that the *normal* is *awe-full*. He examines the childhood and adolescence of a boy growing up as the son and grandson of two Protestant ministers, one rational, the other evangelical. He examines a lifestyle that has been fashionable for poets to repudiate for so long that even to repudiate it is to be trite. He risks using Biblical epigraphs, titles like "Glossolalia," "When You Give It God's Name," "Crèche," "Cross," "Descriptions of Heaven and Hell"; and he even risks direct statements like "Now I will tell you what it all means" and "how impressed one remains/ . . . that there are both ecstasy/ and the word against it." Like McHugh, Jarman twists familiar phrases and quotations, but less to jerk than to amplify a point or support a tone he has already created: "The meek do not want it [to inherit the earth]"; "the human odor of happiness"; "a guardian secret

attends us"; "Now we can stretch,/ loosen the tie that binds,/ unbutton cuffs . . ."

The poem "What Child Is This" demonstrates the technique of finding strangeness in the familiar by looking at it closely, recording it matter-of-factly, and then explaining it:

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Out in the parking lot, preseasonal,
the Christmas carol stops with a car engine.
And the lovely tune it is set to, "Greensleeves,"
continues, like a dimming light in a radio,
haunting us as we go on talking to Grandfather.

Hovering like adorers at his chrome crib,
Father and I might make him laugh, if he could stand
outside his coma, his scrawny doll's body,
reading the crack in our attention, the worry —
Will he remain like this through Christmas?

He might wonder that himself, waiting for heaven.
But when he sighs and smacks his lips
the sounds are so personal, I jump. And Father,
snapping on his razor, sighs back to him
a commiserating "Yes," and tells me to keep talking.

And it's like talking to the one-sided past,
telling him he's released, his God is waiting,
and hearing only his silence, the razor shaving him,
and the old hymn yoked to the older folk song,
the cast-out lover complaining through the holiness.

In language and syntax that make no pretense at poetic effects of rhythm or sound, that use stanza breaks like prose paragraphs, and even risk worn adjectives like *lovely* and *haunting*, Jarman describes a scene common enough in hospital rooms at Christmas — a son and grandson performing the last and the first ser-

vice for a man, caring for his helpless body. The servers are grouped like Magi to perform this menial act. They talk to the dying man as if he were there, though they know he is in a coma. But they go through the motions, assert to him the things he has always asserted to reassure them; but it is "like talking to the one-sided past," they hear no affirmation. They hear only a Christmas carol to the tune of a forsaken lover's lament ("Greensleeves"), a "cast-out lover complaining through the holiness" — the birth *by* death, the birth *for* death. Nothing novel about it, but strange, still strange.

Another example:

WHEN YOU GIVE IT GOD'S NAME

They leave their lightless palazzo,
the mile-deep cavern offshore,
because they are hungry.
Always it is late summer.
Early morning, in the shallows,
you see them, the pulp-headed tentacles
among kelp, feeding on the red tide,
which at night is a green sleight
of hand in the sleeves of waves.

These are simple creatures.
When the tide spreads minutely
across the bellies of swimmers,
they flick their barbed arms against flesh.
Lofted by swells, like torn sacks in wind,
they collapse on the beach,
lumps shovelled under wet sand.
Even buried, their poison
in its fine shafts keeps a long time.

The tide is their God,
and it breeds where they breed.
You will have to go out

to deep water, take a lamp,
some means of descent, gain entry
among black pillars, fanged hedges,
to find it once summer is over,
just a faint green by your light,
alive with its angels feasting.

Jarman spends the first two stanzas accurately describing the life and feeding habits of jellyfish. Then in the last stanza comes the surprise insight, explained: "The [red] tide is their god/ . . . just a faint green by your light,/ alive with its angels feasting." God with a beard may be man-made and man-killed, but as angels are to deity and as jellyfish are to a green luminescence, so men are to — a dead system? A false idea? Nothing? Strange, quite strange!

Like Stern and McHugh, Jarman speaks of his poetic method, though indirectly. He seeks his moment of awareness by means of a long, close look at some commonplace of personal memory:

So much comes to mind
from the side, like the dust
down blades of sunlight.
. . .
So much comes to pieces
like the dust, seeking attachments,
leaning obliquely forward
to get the whole picture.

"Greensleeves"

Because they can detect this strangeness in the commonplace and evoke the same recognition in their readers, by whatever method, I consider *A World of Difference*, *The Red Coal*, and *The Rote Walker* to be three of the chief books that have shaken foil for us in 1981.

Alberta Turner

Sylvia Plath, **The Collected Poems** (Harper & Row, 1981).
Anne Sexton, **The Complete Poems** (Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

I have begun to dread writing this essay. It seemed like a good idea to pair these books, collected poems appearing in the same year by two poets who were friends and who took their own lives. Sexton and Plath are linked in the public mind as notorious types of the doomed romantic poet, and in critical pigeonholes as confessional poets of the sixties who took their cues from Lowell's *Life Studies*. Why not consider them together at some length?

But the more I consider the comparison, the more I find that it is all to Plath's advantage. For all we may find to object to in her poems — and there is plenty — she will continue to be a poet we cannot ignore. Her small canon, more development than full achievement, newly presented in chronological order, is, for all its unevenness, quite fascinating. Sexton's book, by contrast, makes very tedious reading. Poem after poem lapses into self-indulgence and self-pity. Again and again we are faced with poor construction and slack versification, with fancy grimly doing the work of imagination. Sexton's main vehicle of poetic locomotion is the arresting and forced simile, and what she writes, it will begin to dawn on the weary reader of the *Complete Poems*, is a kind of versified, snazzy prose, a caricature of Lowell with his historical vision and pungent music left out. Plath's vehicle, on the other hand, is the metaphoric — and metamorphic — leap of association, dazzling synapses that may bewilder readers, who nevertheless sense that they are in the presence of true poetry. If Lowell gave her some inspiration, Plath is nevertheless way out ahead of him much of the time, taking greater risks and experimenting with collocations of imagery and emotion he never attempted.

For both these writers, as the notoriety fades the verse begins to show itself for what it really is. About the only advantage I can find for the Sexton volume is Maxine Kumin's sympathetic introduction; it is much more informative than Ted Hughes's very clipped account of his late wife's work. We can

admire Kumin's succinct biography and grant her the partiality of friendship. Sexton's work, she tells us, was a kind of desperate therapy that kept her alive through years in which her powerful impulse to suicide would otherwise have mastered her. True enough, and it makes Sexton's a compelling case history. But Kumin also wants to believe that "Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon." I wish I could agree.

Since I cannot be Sexton's apologist here, I do not intend to hold her work up to any kind of detailed examination or attempt to measure her achievement against Sylvia Plath's. I would rather just register my opinion that one of these books is very much worth owning and one is not, and get on to a larger consideration of the one that is.

* * *

When Sylvia Plath was coming of age as a poet in the fifties, the best alternative to the civilized formalism represented by Auden and the unbuttoned mystagoguery of the Beats, was the dense-textured musical expressionism variously practiced by Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethke, and Robert Lowell. Imitations of Thomas were common on both sides of the Atlantic, but his style was too distinctively Welsh and English to be adaptable to American needs. Roethke and Lowell, while problematical in some ways, were closer to home. Roethke did not always make sense, but he was flinging language around the way Jackson Pollock flung paint, and the result was, often, a compelling verbal music. Lowell's early historical poems were generally hollow at the core, but they had brilliant surfaces, charged with an energy based on closely-packed sound effects, and they rolled along like gaudy circus calliopes. Thomas, Lowell and Roethke were practitioners of a poetry that had more to do with language's expressive possibilities, an intense music rising miraculously through ordinary speech, than with subject matter and religious or social beliefs. I would argue that in their love of verbal intensity they were Sylvia Plath's real predecessors, her singing school. Their pantheon included Hopkins, Keats, Milton and Donne; she would appear to have earned a place in it herself.

One could argue further that her real initiation to this kind of poetic commitment came through Ted Hughes. It is certainly true that Hughes was the most exciting young practitioner of it in England. *The Hawk in the Rain* (1956), which he was writing when he met and married Plath, shows his interest very clearly:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.
While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges,

Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,
And rain hacks my head to the bone, the hawk hangs
The diamond point of will that polestars
The sea drowner's endurance . . . .

("The Hawk in the Rain")

Plenty of Hopkins and Thomas there. Plenty of hokum too, some readers might want to add, but the sense then was — and continues to be for me — that Hughes was in touch with exciting possibilities inherent in our language, ways of bringing words and experience together to illuminate both. We can note that Hughes was also interested in animal magic, primitivism, and an expressionistic treatment of landscape — preoccupations his wife would come to share —, but the main sense I bring away from such poems is that the poet is pinning his hopes on the dazzling energy that is released when poetic discourse is also highly expressive sound.

And is that where Sylvia Plath formed her allegiance to this tradition? The answer is, yes and no. Her work before she met Hughes already demonstrated a commitment to training her ear and weaving a dense texture of sound effects:

Sunlight strikes a glass of grapefruit juice,
flaring green through philodendron leaves
in this surrealistic house
of pink and beige, impeccable bamboo,
patronized by convalescent wives;
heat shadows waver noiseless in
bright window-squares until the women seem
to float like dream-fish in the languid limbo
of an undulant aquarium.

("Morning in the Hospital Solarium")

This is apprentice work, to be sure, but the nature of the interest behind it is clear; the poet is chasing the elusive combination of image and sound where poetry occurs, and the chase is fairly decorous. After her marriage to Hughes, she moves, as it were, outdoors, into a much more sinewy and energetic manner:

Water in the millrace, through a sluice of stone,
    plunges headlong into that black pond
where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan
    floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind
which hungers to haul the white reflection down.

The austere sun descends above the fen,
    an orange cyclops-eye, scorning to look
longer on this landscape of chagrin;
    feathered dark in thought, I stalk like a rook,
brooding as the winter night comes on.

("Winter Landscape, with Rooks")

My guess is that people who knew them both in those days, from Hughes's having come a bit earlier to this style and from traditional views about husbands and wives, assumed that she would follow along in his rather gooey tracks, producing imitations of his thunder-and-lightning style. What surprises lay in store for them! As it turned out, she went right past him, mounted on her steaming charger, her Pegasus-Ariel, and where she went, few can follow.

* * *

One thing that this *Collected Poems* shows us, then, is the long and careful apprenticeship that led to the dozen or so great poems Sylvia Plath contributed to our language in the last two years of her life. For anyone who wants to know how difficult great poetry is to write, how much trial and error and gradual refinement lead to those apparently effortless bursts of original expression and insight, it is all here, in as much detail as you could care to ask for. Sylvia Plath's early poems do not show us that she was precocious or unrecognized, or that major achievements have lain hidden these many years, obscured by the fame of *Ariel;* they show us rather that she was a gifted writer and a tireless worker who gradually freed herself from her influences and worked her way toward a poetic style that would do justice to her terrible sense of reality, to its ugliness, splendor and terror. From the point of view of her poetic achievement, what matters is not that she suffered, that she was visited simultaneously by emotional destruction and artistic inspiration, but that she was *ready* when those pressures arrived, and could turn them to account in the form of poems. Those who find the conjoining of creation and destruction an attractive romantic myth will always want to assume that the achievement of these poems cost her her life. They may be right. I prefer to notice the sensible counterweight that her development demonstrates; that poems are written less from the accidents of misfortune and inspiration than from the sheer hard work of apprenticeship, and that the white-hot intensity of the *Ariel* poems was as much a product of a deliberate search for an expressive — and expressionistic — style as it was the byproduct of psychic aberration or unmitigated suffering. What mixed feelings Plath herself must have had as she realized that her artistic control was realizing its fullest possibilities, its payoff, at the same time that her ability to survive as a coherent and undespairing self was deserting her!

Any reader who wishes to measure her development from the accomplished uplands of her first collection, *The Colossus,* to the dizzy peaks of her final poems, might try the experiment of comparing treatments of a similar subject from those two phases

of her work. "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows," for example, one of the finer poems in *The Colossus*, can be considered next to "Sheep in Fog," a poem from the final month of her life. Both are landscape or "prospect" poems, and both find death and oblivion hiding within the ostensibly attractive features of nature and natural vitality. "Watercolor," as its title suggests, mostly emphasizes the lush beauty of the water meadows near Cambridge University where undergraduates boat for pleasure, and it is not until the last stanza that the poet suggests a presence that the students unwittingly symbolize by wearing black:

> Droll, vegetarian, the water rat
> Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,
> While the students stroll or sit,
> Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love —
> Black-gowned, but unaware
> How in such mild air
> The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

The verbal music here is still rather predictable, and the poem minds its manners through its decorously rhymed stanzas and ruminative presentation of detail.

With "Sheep in Fog" the manner has grown stripped and direct. Its mysterious landscape, where visual perception is limited and sounds take on a curious distinctness, is swiftly established by the title and first line, so that the speaker's relation to the "prospect" can be considered without delay:

SHEEP IN FOG

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The title has suggested pastoral and biblical meanings — are we not all sheep in fog? — but the sheep are dismissed as the scale of things grows to the distant succession of hills (pacing evenly or

falling off cliffs?) and then to the invisible witnesses of the second line. If people cannot be told from stars, their distance is immense as well, and their sad regard (suggested first, perhaps, by sudden encounters with the sheep) is of faint concern in a world where things are receding emphatically from the speaker. Sound texture continues to be important to Plath here, but it is never used for its own sake, only to further the expressive economy of the poem. Sound has become condensation rather than elaboration, as the next lines show:

> The train leaves a line of breath.
> O slow
> Horse the color of rust,
>
> Hooves, dolorous bells —

Is the train compared to a horse here, or does the landscape contain both? Do the hooves and bells suggest cows or bring us back to the sheep? The fog will not tell us for sure, and it doesn't matter. The details sketch an animation that recedes from, rather than approaching, the speaker. And now a very familiar kind of comparison is presented:

> All morning the
> Morning has been blackening,
>
> A flower left out.

The repetition of "morning" shows the kind of fearless economy Plath was practicing and the complexity of the morning-flower comparison, an image we sense as deeply interior, a promise turning in upon itself to corrupt and deaden hope, is startling by virtue of its very simplicity. Already enough perception has been accomplished to allow conclusion and summary:

> My bones hold a stillness, the far
> Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

This is so exact and quiet, and at the same time so wonderfully musical, as to be positively breathtaking. It sounds like Roethke, but in its movement and articulation, its return to the opening details and calm opting for oblivion, it is stronger and more precise. The path to such achievement lies through ambitions and standards that lead to accomplishments like "Watercolor" and then push on, unsatisfied, asking for more.

One of my own favorites in *The Colossus* is "The Manor Garden," both for its own strength and for its anticipation of the "motherhood" poems in *Ariel*. The speaker, a pregnant woman, addresses her unborn foetus with a surprising detachment:

The fountains are dry and the roses over.
Incense of death. Your day approaches.
The pears fatten like little buddhas.
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

You move through the era of fishes,
The smug centuries of the pig —
Head, toe and finger
Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings,
These crowns of acanthus,
And the crow settles her garments.
You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,

Two suicides, the family wolves,
Hours of blankness. Some hard stars
Already yellow the heavens.
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms
Quit their usual habitations.
The small birds converge, converge
With their gifts to a difficult borning.

The lists in this poem are both surprising and right, and the enlarged awareness of the mother-to-be refines our sense of the meaning of pregnancy and birth without sentimentalizing or idealizing them. Some of the best poems in *Ariel* — "Morning Song," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "The Night Dances" — extend the insights of motherhood begun in this poem, and remain among her greatest accomplishments, exact and true and painfully beautiful. Helpful notes about the identity of Nick and the specific origin of "The Night Dances" enhance the usefulness of *The Collected Poems*. New readers will find them less confusing.

* * *

Whenever I read Sylvia Plath's poems I seem to go through the same stages of reaction. First I am dazzled by the technical accomplishment, the brilliant control of language and the unerring moves of the poet's imagination. Then, as the insistence of death-wish, a romance of suicide that amounts at times to a kind of spiritual pornography, comes through, I am dismayed and repelled. Finally, I search out a balance between the intense and self-indulgent negativity that runs through all her late work, and what is normative and saving about her poetry. She may be fascinated by death, but we all need to share some of that fascination, and she is also a brilliant observer and celebrator of life. Her best poems seem to me to be not the shrill anthology favorites like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," or exercises in perversity like "Cut," "Lesbos," or "Medusa." I prefer the kind of control exhibited variously in "Ariel," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," and the beekeeping poems. I admire the tonal balance of poems as different as "Death & Co.," "Poppies in October," and "Sheep in Fog." I marvel at the beauty of "Winter Trees," "Kindness,"

"Balloons," and the motherhood group mentioned above. And I linger over the mysteries of poems like "Words" and "The Couriers." I think Sylvia Plath is miscast as feminist martyr, romantic prodigy, and helpless psychotic. To me she is a greatly gifted and deeply unhappy poet whose small, intense, hard-earned body of poetry is now our wonderful and troubling inheritance.

David Young

Philip Levine, **One for the Rose** (Atheneum, 1981).
Charles Wright, **The Southern Cross** (Random House, 1981).

In a FIELD review last year, David Young praised new books by Charles Simic and Dennis Schmitz for the ways both found to resolve the problem of excessive self-preoccupation that plagues many recent male poets. Strong new books by Philip Levine and Charles Wright suggest alternative, equally effective ways of transcending the limitations of the ego. In a sense the crisis of subjectivity is a more acute problem for Levine and Wright, since in temperament and tone they are more inherently romantic — compare the titles of their volumes (their conjunction would have pleased Yeats!) to Simic's *Classic Ballroom Dances* and Schmitz's *String* — but at their confident best here they manage to balance personal concerns with aesthetic and dramatic distance, producing an interaction between self and world that is exhilarating and true.

Levine's *One for the Rose* has been roundly panned by Helen Vendler in the *New York Review of Books,* for reasons that seem to me mostly specious. Vendler argues that Levine believes "realism is the only credible base for verse," and that whenever he departs from the realist mode — to the philosophical or fantastical or playful — the results are disastrous. To the contrary, *One for the Rose* seems to me most successful when it abandons the gritty realism of his recent volumes and mines instead the mythic vein represented in his earlier work by such poems as "Not This Pig," "They Feed They Lion," and "Angel Butcher."

Like most of *7 Years from Somewhere* (1979) and *The Names of the Lost* (1976), a number of these poems begin in the careful, drab detail of memory and move toward apotheosis. Poems that begin like these are instantly recognizable as Levine's:

> I woke in a cold room
> near the port. I rose and dressed
> and went downstairs for coffee,
> but the cooks were arguing
> over *futbol* and didn't see me.
> So I walked the shadowed streets

until I came to the old burned
cathedral of Santa Maria del Mar.

("That Day")

My oldest son comes to visit me
in the hospital. He brings giant
peonies and the nurse puts them
in a glass vase, and they sag quietly
on the windowsill where they
seem afraid to gaze out at the city
smoking beneath. He asks when I
will be coming home. I don't know.

("Having Been Asked 'What is a Man?' I Answer")

Or, to quote a short poem entire:

RAIN

Rain falling on the low-built houses
that climb the back of this mountain,
rain streaming down the pocked roads
and bringing with it the hard yellow earth
in little rivers that blacken my shoes,
speechless as ever, like shy animals.
I wait in the doorway of a tobacco shop
and the men go in and out cursing the season.
They light up before they step back into it,
shoulders hunched, heads down, starting
up the long climb to a house of wet cardboard
and makeshift paper windows. No, this
is not the island of Martinique or Manhattan
or the capitol of sweet airs or the dome
of heaven or hell, many colored, splendid.
This is an ordinary gray Friday after work
and before dark in a city of the known world.

The problem is not that the vision and sentiment expressed here are suspect, but that they're so familiar. The poet's blue-collar Detroit and dusty Spain, his sad losers and awkward adolescents, are presented honestly and often movingly, but so have they been in the earlier volumes. And particularly given the single form in which Levine presently writes, the unbroken skinny column, the prospect of a whole book of these poems — even removed from the format of the *New Yorker* (for which they sometimes feel tailored) — would be fairly forbidding.

Happily, the new collection is leavened, given energy and freshness, by a whole series of poems that draw less on the transcription and refraction of memory than on fabular, fictive, parabolic impulses. In "The Poem of Flight" Levine reinvents himself as the original pilot of the Wright brothers' plane. In "The Myth" he is an inexplicably atavistic suburban father,

> crashing through the berry bushes and nettles
> like a wild dog, baying at the moon
> on long summer nights until the neighbors
> turned up their stereos, sleeping when
> and where I chose under a blanket of stars
> and waking to mornings of peace among doves
> who mourned the lives of doves. I never wept
> because life was what it was. . . .

In "The Fox" he explores his kinship with a totem animal, and "On My Own" is a wonderful fable of metamorphosis and magical power reminiscent of Singer and Garcia Marquez. Other poems, like "One," seem obviously to draw on memory, but through a process of juxtaposition and mysterious association the self of the poem becomes mythic rather than simply autobiographical.

Most of these poems are too long to quote whole, and too intricately structured to allow a section to suffice. I'll quote one poem and let it stand for the rest:

THE FIRST TRUTH

The second truth is that the rose blooms
and the dark petals burn to dust or wind,
and when nothing is left someone remembers
it was once spring and hurries through the snow
on the way home from a day's work, his
quilted jacket bunched high about his neck
against the steady December wind. The day
ends before anyone is ready, even
this single man who lives alone and feeds
two stray cats and himself on large tins
of exotic ocean fish drowned in mustard sauce
or unpeeled potatoes boiled and left to cool.
He sings as he shaves, staring into his eyes
which to him are as mysterious as the eyes
of the two striped cats or the dark eyes
of the black woman who worked beside him
all that day and sighed just the once, after
she'd finished her small lunch of soda pop
and processed cheese and stood up to return
to her job. She wore a small wedding ring
and a gold cross on a gold chain. In the mirror
he sees his own silver chain disappear under
his shirt and the thick arms that want to crush
someone he has never known against his body
and stand in silence, warm against the wind,
which he knows is blowing because it blew
that morning on the way to work and that evening
on the way back. He stands, half-shaven, staring
into a face that is suddenly his own face
which has given him a name ever since he could speak.
He steps back as far as he can to see all of the man
he would give up if you knocked at his door.

This poem seems particularly interesting because, while it uses characters of the sort we often see in Levine's work, its treat-

ment of them is resonant and unpredictable. The single man and his shaving mirror, the black woman and her meager lunch, the steady wind — all serve to demarcate a familiar urban landscape and atmosphere. But the poem's meditative metamorphosis — the way in which the opening generalization becomes a metaphor of the seasons, only gradually focusing dramatically and gaining narrative interest, then widening at the end to include the reader in a mysterious moment of vision — is imaginatively exhilarating. And the means by which the two characters are linked through the associations of cats and food and chains elevates the poem's experience beyond that of portraiture, producing instead a potent revelation of knowledge and desire.

"The First Truth" also provides refutation of two of Vendler's generalizations. The language of this poem reflects neither "stubborn earthiness" or "romantic organ tones," the only two modes of which she apparently thinks Levine is capable. Released from the confines of realist scenarios, his imagination finds verbal expression that is close to the bone yet suffused with a restrained lyricism. Phrases such as "his/quilted jacket bunched high about his neck" and "unpeeled potatoes boiled and left to cool" suggest how sensitive Levine is to sound — it's an authentic American music Williams would have admired. Nor is the charge that Levine is "simply a memoir-writer in prose who chops up his reminiscent paragraphs into short lines" borne out by this poem. That it might work in prose is irrelevant; what seems to me the real issue is what the line-breaks contribute. And in this case it's a great deal: the lineation sets up complex patterns of rhythm, suspension, and revelation which add in scarcely definable but crucial ways to the effect of the poem. Perhaps a better experiment than Vendler's (rewriting the poem as prose) would be to relineate:

> The day ends before anyone is ready,
> even this single man who lives alone
> and feeds two stray cats and himself
> on large tins of exotic ocean fish
> drowned in mustard sauce. . . .

Surely most readers can sense the loss. *One for the Rose* is not an entirely successful volume, but in those poems in which his fictive imagination comes fully into play, Levine displaces romantic autobiography into mythic narratives of great economy and impact.

Charles Wright is at least as much a romantic as Levine — his subject is always finally some version of his experience or vision — but even at their most self-conscious, his recent poems are never self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing. After repeated readings, I'm still not sure how he manages it. A description of this book might make it sound attitudinizing or breathy, a sort of Shelleyan effusion. In fact *The Southern Cross* is a controlled, resilient, and absolutely accurate performance, one of the best books I've read since — well, since his *China Trace* (1977) and *Bloodlines* (1975).

Wright's epigraph is a passage from the *Purgatorio* in which Virgil warns a shade not to embrace him because (in Singleton's translation) "you are a shade and a shade you see," to which the shade replies, "Now you may comprehend the measure of the love that burns in me for you, when I forget our emptiness and treat shades as solid things." It's appropriate in a number of ways. The book's mode is deeply elegiac; the poet corresponds with the shades of Cézanne, Pound, Li Po, Hart Crane, and Dante himself, as well as all those earlier avatars of himself that insist on rising from the dead. The theme of a love powerful enough to subsume emptiness is also central here; Wright's world is tragic, but also often heartbreakingly beautiful. Finally, while in the *Purgatorio* everything outside the poet is insubstantial, a series of shades not to be mistaken for "solid things," in *The Southern Cross* the world is manifestly, ecstatically tangible. That's one of the ways Wright escapes self-enclosure, I think, by recreating the world so vividly and acutely that there's no question that his subject is merely himself. Within individual poems, and from poem to poem, the relation of the ghostly to the tangible is explored by interweaving them; the visionary and the domestic alternate and occasionally merge, as in this passage about the dead from the long opening poem, "Homage to Paul Cézanne":

Sometimes they lie like leaves in their little arks, and curl
up at the edges.
Sometimes they come inside, wearing our shoes, and walk
From mirror to mirror.
Or lie in our beds with their gloves off
And touch our bodies. Or talk
In a corner. Or wait like envelopes on a desk.

They reach up from the ice plant.
They shuttle their messengers through the oat grass.
Their answers rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery
leaves.

We rub them off our hands.

The opening passage of the title poem could stand as a touchstone for all of *The Southern Cross*:

Things that divine us we never touch:

The black sounds of the night music,
The Southern Cross, like a kite at the end of its string,

And now this sunrise, and empty sleeve of a day,
The rain just starting to fall, and then not fall,

No trace of a story line.

With few exceptions, these poems are released from a "story line," from the pressure of narrative or any overt dramatic scenario; they're structured instead as reactions to and meditations on the apparently random sequence of memory and event. We see *glimpses* of the past, of remembered landscapes and situations, but they rarely come into full focus — in other words, the poems remain almost purely lyrical. Yet even in those poems where Wright speaks most directly of his own experience ("Virginia Reel," "Bar Giamaica, 1959–60," "Gate City Break-

down"), there's no posturing or self-inflation, but a sense of utter integrity. And in the book's second section, the five poems each called "Self-Portrait" are all different and all curiously transparent; here's the fifth:

SELF-PORTRAIT

In Murray, Kentucky I lay once
On my side, the ghost-weight of a past life in my arms,
A life not mine. I know she was there,
Asking for nothing, heavy as bad luck, still waiting to rise.
I know now and I lift her.

Evening becomes us.
I see myself in a tight dissolve, and answer to no one.
Self-traitor, I smuggle in
The spider love, undoer and rearranger of all things.
Angel of Mercy, strip me down.

This world is a little place,
Just red in the sky before the sun rises.
Hold hands, hold hands
That when the birds start, none of us is missing.
Hold hands, hold hands.

In painting, the self-portrait is not usually a romantic or expressionist genre; rather, the painter turns the ready subject of the self into an object, a kind of still life to be formally contemplated. Wright seems to use the notion of self-portraiture for its rhetorical possibilities: it provides a network or web into which he can collect a variety of impressions and fragments that are linked by their relation to the self at the center.

This poem begins with a mysteriously located memory of an encounter with a ghostly presence; once that spirit was heavy and earth-bound, but now through the speaker's imagination he can help her to rise. The first line of the second stanza is a kind of pun: evening both is appropriate to us and constitutes us. The

speaker then explicitly sees himself from aesthetic distance, as in a film ("a tight dissolve"), and apparently as a result proclaims his independence ("answer to no one"). Immediately he contradicts this claim through a variation on Donne's "Twickenham Garden": "But oh, self-traitor, I do bring / The spider love, which transubstantiates all, / And can convert manna to gall." Significantly, Wright's "spider love" is less a poisoner than a rearranger, and the poem seems constantly to be rearranging experience — a self-portrait composed of found materials, a Joseph Cornell box radiating possibilities. It closes with a prayer for simplicity and then — in a voice stripped down to that of a child — a chant for comfort and protection. The focus opens widely at the end, reaching out to include the reader in imaginative communion, but its structure has been inclusive from the start. Reading, we focus not on the feelings and personal experience that may have given rise to the poem, but rather on the mood and idea that evolve from this collection of details and gestures. It's a portrait that creates a self more than it expresses one.

As "Self-Portrait" suggests, Wright's language in *The Southern Cross* tends to be more relaxed, not quite as hieratic as in *China Trace*. He can pull out the stops when he chooses:

> And the viridescent shirtwaists of light the trees wear.
> And the sutra-circles of cattle egrets wheeling out past the
> rain showers.
> And the spiked marimbas of dawn rattling their amulets . . .

But often there seems to be a recognition that a more chastened rhetoric is appropriate for the sort of communion with the past and the dead that is undertaken here:

> We filigree and we baste.
> But what do the dead care for the fringe of words,
> Safe in their suits of milk?
> What do they care for the honk and flash of a new style?

How risky it is to structure a passage simply as a list of things forgotten and things remembered, and how beautifully it works:

I can't remember the colors I said I'd never forget
On Via Giulia at sundown,
The ochres and glazes and bright hennas of each house,
Or a single day from November of 1964.
I can't remember the way the stairs smelled
or the hallway smelled
At Piazza del Biscione.
Or just how the light fell
Through the east-facing window over the wicker chairs there.

I do remember the way the boar hung
in the butcher shop at Christmas
Two streets from the Trevi fountain, a crown of holly and
mistletoe
Jauntily over his left ear.
I do remember the flower paintings
Nodding through the May afternoons
on the dining room walls
At Zajac's place.
And the reliquary mornings,
And Easter, and both Days of the Dead . . .

That seems utterly matter-of-fact, but it recreates place, mood, and culture with wonderful economy. And then Wright merges past into present, upping the verbal and emotional ante:

At noon in the English Cemetery no one's around.
Keats is off to the left, in an open view.
Shelley and Someone's son are straight up ahead.

With their marble breath and their marble names,
the sun in a quick squint through the trees,
They lie at the edge of everywhere,
Rome like a stone cloud at the back of their eyes.

Time is the villain in most tales,
and here, too,

Lowering its stiff body into the water.
Its landscape is the resurrection of the word,
No end of it,
the petals of wreckage in everything.

Out of context, the last line might seem overblown or melodramatic; by quoting the whole passage I've tried to show how it's prepared for, how in allowing himself the slow and almost prosaic rhythms of the list Wright earns the heightened vision and diction of the ending. This sort of progression leads to extraordinarily complex tonalities: I find the following both celebratory and melancholy, for instance:

August licks at the pine trees.
Sun haze, and little fugues from the creek.
Fern-sleep beneath the green skirt of the marsh.

I always imagine a mouth
Starting to open its blue lips
Inside me, an arm
curving sorrowfully over an open window
At evening, and toads leaping out of the wet grass.

Again the silence of flowers.
Again the faint notes of piano music back in the woods.
How easily summer fills the room.

Does such a passage grow out of acute observation of the natural world, or out of transcendent vision? The uncanny answer, I think, is that the voice somehow seems to become an extension of the eye — or vice versa — and that nature and spirit appear to merge in a way that feels almost *objectively* true. I don't pretend to understand how this works, but it's breathtaking to witness. *The Southern Cross* is the work of a master writing at the height of his powers, and signals a number of directions that I'd guess some of the best poetry of the eighties will follow.

David Walker

CONTRIBUTORS

We first had poems by WERNER ASPENSTRÖM, as translated by ROBIN FULTON, in *FIELD* 11. He is the author of some fourteen volumes of poetry and prose.

MARIANNE BORUCH, who appears here for the first time in *FIELD*, is teaching this spring at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Other poems by her are forthcoming in **Partisan Review** and **The American Poetry Review**.

MARTHA COLLINS is director of Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

"For a contributor's note," writes JAMES GALVIN, "why not just mention my book, **Imaginary Timber**, from Doubleday, and say I hail from Tie Siding, Wyoming."

MIROSLAV HOLUB is Visiting Writer and Fulbright Professor of Creative Writing at Oberlin this semester, and we are especially pleased to have the opportunity to present his new long poem, "Interferon," to our readers. His collection, **Sagittal Section**, is of course still available in the Field Translation Series.

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN, a frequent contributor to *FIELD*, lives and works in Jerusalem.

The Dollmaker's Ghost, LARRY LEVIS's newest collection, was the winner of the Open Competition of the National Poetry Series. He has been teaching this year and last in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa.

VALERY NASH is the author of **The Narrows**, published by Cleveland State. She teaches at the North Cross School in Roanoke, Virginia.

DENNIS SCHMITZ lives in Sacramento, California. His latest book is **String**, from Ecco Press in 1980.

A new collection by WILLIAM STAFFORD, **A Glass Face in the Rain**, is due from Harper and Row next fall. Smaller projects include **A Correspondence in Poetry**, with Marvin Bell (Godine), **Sometimes Like a Legend** (Copper Canyon), and **Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People**, (BOA).

The two poems in this issue by NANCY WILLARD are from a group of poems based on newspaper headlines. Her collection of children's poetry, **A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers**, won the Newbery Award this year.

CHARLES WRIGHT's new collection, **The Southern Cross** (Random House), is discussed by DAVID WALKER in this issue.

$3

FLYING FISH, CATALINA ISLAND, CALIF.

One of the strange sights to the tourist is the Flying Fish, which at certain periods of the year are numerous about the Island. During the summer months, nightly, a trip is made with a boat equipped with powerful searchlights, which when played upon the water, attract these fish by the hundreds.

WESTERN PUBLISHING & NOVELTY CO., LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

POST CARD

THIS SPACE FOR ADDRESS ONLY

Rhoda Hilton

c/o L. J. Cully

R. F. D. - Lexington

Ohio.